

MANHUNT

WORLD'S BEST SELLING CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

MAY, 1957

35 CENTS

THE DEADLY DOLLS

by
Henry Kane

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Also:

GIL BREWER
TALMAGE POWELL
DE FORBES
HENRY SLESAR
RICHARD DEMING

•

**EVERY STORY
NEW!**



MANHUNT

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MAY, 1957

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PROWLER!

by

GIL

BREWER

WAITING, he lay perfectly still in the hot moist darkness. His body, naked beneath the thin sheet, was covered with perspiration. He lay in a kind of patient agony, waiting for his wife to sleep. He stared straight up at the moon-washed ceiling, somehow containing his breath, thinking about what was in the living room behind the screen, on the studio couch.

His wife writhed and twisted, then settled again on the bed, nearly touching him. Working very slowly, he edged away from her—waiting, as a fury of blood drummed in his ears.

Sometimes his heart beat so loudly he imagined Grace would hear.

And he was listening, too . . .

Listening for those intimate, secret sounds that now and then reached him from the living room. The sound of delicious turning, of a carelessly moved leg. Long, plumply curved, lovely.

Shirly.

Lying in there on the studio couch, waiting, too. Waiting for him.

Sometimes he almost yelled, it was that bad.

"Nick?" Grace said.

He didn't answer, cringing inside, cursing.

"Nick, you asleep?"

Grace stirred. One hand reached out and touched his arm, then jerked away. He knew very well that she wouldn't stop until he answered her. He knew she knew that he was awake. Husbands and wives know those things, feel them.

"Nick?" she whispered softly.

"Yes. What?"

"It's so *hot*!"

"Yeah," he said quietly, thinking, "Go to sleep, you bitch—go to sleep."



Tom O'Fallon

A luscious girl like Shirly . . . No wonder she attracted a prowler.

"I can't go to sleep."

"You don't try."

"I do so try!"

"For God's sake. How you expect to get to sleep lying there, talking to me? Calm down. Take long breaths. I've got to sleep, Grace. How can I with you telling me you can't sleep?"

She sat up on the bed. "But I can't sleep."

He lay there gnawing the inside of his cheek. Moonlight was bright in the room. He was soaking wet now, his heart thumping and thumping.

"Guess I'll read awhile."

Before he could even speak, she turned on the bedlight. It glared across her. He came to one elbow.

"Grace! Good God, I can't sleep with that light on. You'll never get to sleep reading. You've got to lie down and relax." He lay down, forcing himself to remain still, holding on somehow, listening.

His wife frowned at him. Then, quickly, she flipped off the sheet and slipped out of bed. She wore a red shorty nightgown, and she was a very pretty woman. Nick didn't think so, however. He could see her only as a barrier to a force that was driving him out of his head.

"Wonder if Shirl's asleep?" she whispered, standing by the bed, scratching her thigh. "You think she can sleep in this awful heat?"

He kept his eyes on the ceiling. "She certainly won't be able to sleep with you tramping around, talking. Why the hell don't you get in bed and try to sleep?"

She smiled at him. She had dark hair, richly thick around her curved shoulders. Her breasts thrust at the thin fabric of the gown.

"Going to get a glass of water," she said, turning, moving toward the hallway that led to the bathroom. "Good Lord, it's hot—hot—hot!"

Her round buttocks shadowed under the gown, bunching as she padded from the room.

He lay there. He waited. The toilet flushed, roaring into the night. Grace cleared her throat. She started to hum, then quickly ceased. A water faucet spouted, ran, and ran, and ran. He writhed on the bed, slithering against the drenched sheets. He heard her hold the glass under the faucet. She drank, turned the faucet off, dumped out the glass, slapped it carelessly back into its wall-bracket.

"Ooops!" she said, admonishing herself. "Shhh!"

The bathroom light clicked off. She padded into the bedroom, smiling toward him.

"Nick?"

He moved his eyes slowly open. "Huh? Oh, Jesus, I was asleep. Aw, cripes, Grace—you woke me up."

"Sorry, darling. Say, you remember what I did with that book from the library? The one about the flea circus? It's so interesting. You oughta read it. I can't find it."

He lay there. "Please," he said. "You'll never get to sleep reading something you like." He came to one elbow again, his hair soaked, eyes bleary. "Come on. Get in bed. Turn off the light. Just snuggle down and stretch out, and you'll soon be asleep. Okay?" He grinned at her.

"Oh, all right!" She snapped it at him. She crossed to the bed, flopped down, pounded at the pillow, sighed, turned off the light and lay there. "Maybe I should go in and see if Shirl's all right," she said.

He said nothing.

"It's hotter in the living room than it is out here."

You telling me, he thought, immediately visioning Shirley lying naked on the studio couch, waiting for him. The thick auburn hair. The luscious white-skinned body, shaped to drive a man crazy. Willing, waiting. The wet red lips, the hot dark blue eyes, those hot little hands. The sly way of her, secret, laden with passionate treachery. A pure and simple sex-pot, but close-mouthed and careful—and always ready, anytime, anywhere. Eager. Urgent.

"Nick!" Grace's voice was nasty. "I've been talking to you. The least you can do is listen."

He whispered it softly. "I'm trying to sleep."

"I was just saying, Shirl should be more careful, the way she acts. Running around the yard, the way she does. Well—exposing herself. She is my sister, and I want to help her get started again, the way her marriage went on the rocks, like that. But, you know, the Johnsons reported a prowler to the cops, just last week. And she's always—well, just showing everything she's got to everybody—every man that comes along. Runs out to the milk truck, like that. She won't listen." She paused, then said, "She's just got too much of everything."

"Sure. G'night."

He lay there, waiting. The night was still and hot, a slow hot wind lifting lazily at the curtains, sliding across the bed, like a dry, hot dragon's breath.

Suddenly, he knew she was asleep—or, starting to sleep. And he knew he still had to wait.

... thinking about last night, and the night before, and all the other nights. The wild hot nights on the studio couch with Shirley. And tonight, too—a thousand nights would never be enough. They would have to do something, but whenever he mentioned divorcing Grace, Shirley just laughed.

"*You can have anything you want,*" she would say softly. "*I'm always ready, Nicky—always. But the edge will go away if we get married. You know that. This is what makes it so good!*"

They were in the garage that time, standing in a corner by the work-bench. Shirley had on black shorts, and a thin white sweater. Grace was making the beds, her being that close made it all the more wonderful.

"See what I mean, Nicky? Oh, Nicky!"

And this was the time Grace had come into the garage. He had leaped around and stood with his back to her, searching for tools on the work-bench. Shirly's shorts had been on the floor and he'd kicked them under the bench. Shirly had grabbed down a pair of old overalls from a nail on the wall. She sat on a tool box, holding the overalls across her lap, saying, "My goodness, Nick—these overalls are filthy. Just filthy!"

He convinced Grace he wanted them dirty, because he liked them that way. For all Grace knew, Shirly and he had just been gabbing while he was straightening the work bench.

Grace hadn't suspected a thing.

He came awake, staring into the darkness. His wife was breathing deeply and evenly. He'd been asleep, for God's sake! He'd slept. How long?

He listened. There was no sound, but the hot wind drawing through the windows.

He thought he heard a soft movement from the living room. Shirly. Knowing her, he was positive she'd be waiting.

He listened to Grace breathe. It was absolutely even and deep. She was asleep. Once she was asleep, it was difficult to wake her. It would be even better tonight, because she hadn't gone to sleep early. She would sleep for a long time, hard.

He had to admit that all this strain was beginning to tell on him a little. This was the third time he'd fallen asleep, waiting for Grace to konk off. No wonder—every night in there on the studio couch. And sometimes during the day, too.

Thinking of Shirly got him going again.

He began to move toward the edge of the bed. Once he'd awakened Grace. If he did again, he could always say he was going to the bathroom. And he had every movement down to an art, worming slowly like a snake to the edge of the bed, without pulling at the sheet, without causing a sound.

He got one foot off the bed, braced on the floor. In a moment he was clear of the bed. He stood there in the moonlight, looking at his wife, listening to her breathe. She was really out cold tonight. He checked his watch on the dresser. Two-fifteen.

Late. But to the good, really. Once before it had been very late, and Shirly had fallen asleep. He had crept in beside her, and slowly awakened her the way she liked. What a night that had been. He began breathing a bit more rapidly, and moved carefully on bare feet toward the hall door.

Once in the hall, he stepped fast. He came through the dinette, turned through the archway into the living room.

There was no sound, but the slow hot wind out

in the yard. The Australian pines moaned softly.

He moved across the living room to the bamboo screen they'd set up for Shirly, so she'd have some sort of privacy. *Privacy*. Wow, that was a laugh!

He came around the edge of the screen.

She was asleep. Lying face up on the studio couch, the moonlight very dim here. The sheet was pulled up just across her breasts. Her thick hair was fanned out around her head on the pillow, and the lush outline of her body showed in shadow under the sheet.

He did not call to her, did not make a sound.

Slowly, gently, he lifted the sheet. With the same intricate care he had used in leaving his wife's bed, he now slid under the sheet and slowly moved toward the girl. He arranged the sheet over him, and gently eased toward her, whispering her name, "Shirly—baby, baby—here I am, baby."

He put his arms around her, kissing her mouth, and that was when he felt the wetness, when he thought that she must be perspiring heavily.

The living room lights suddenly blazed with a crazy brilliance.

The bamboo screen crashed to the floor.

He leaped up, kneeling on the bed, the sheet falling away. It was then he saw the blood. He was covered with it.

"Well, Nicky?"

Grace stood there in her shorty nightgown, smiling gently at him. Then she didn't smile. She just stood there.

"She's dead!" he shouted. He sprang from the bed in a kind of blind, savage horror, covered with blood from chest to knee. The girl lay in a bath of blood. He couldn't move, couldn't speak now.

"Were you checking again to see if my sister was sleeping okay—eh, Nicky?"

Grace had never called him Nicky.

Grace was pointing to the front screen door. The main door was open. The screen door was slashed, screen curling to the floor.

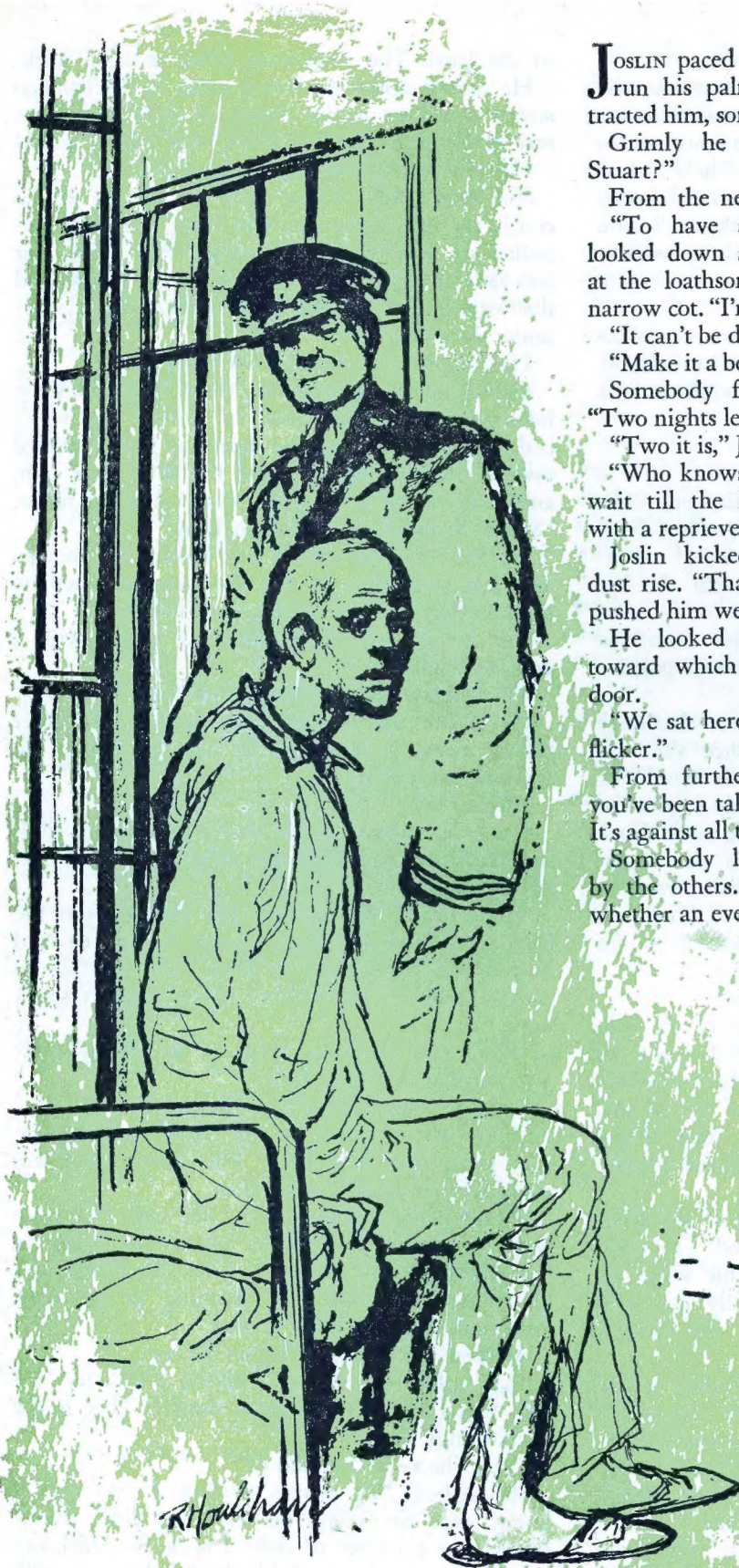
"You'd better call the police," she said. Her voice was very quiet. "A prowler apparently broke in and murdered my sister. It's a terrible thing, isn't it? Why, look," she said, pointing to the floor, "there's the knife he must've used."

A bloody carving knife lay on the rug.

"All right," Grace said. "Maybe it's better if I call. You'd better take a quick shower. They might think things, huh?"

"You," he said. "You did it!"

She sighed. "Of course, darling. I love you. I knew what was going on with that little tramp. It was just a matter of time. I spoke to Shirly, but she refused to leave. Said she'd take you with her." She moved toward the phone. "Hurry up," she said. "Take your shower, Nicky."



JOSLIN paced the small cell. He stopped briefly to run his palm along the bars. The motion distracted him, sometimes.

Grimly he asked, "Want to make that bet, Stuart?"

From the next cell, Stuart asked softly, "Why?"

"To have something to think about." Joslin looked down at his shoes without laces and back at the loathsome sink and bedpan as well as the narrow cot. "I'm trying it anyhow, you know."

"It can't be done," Stuart said.

"Make it a bet."

Somebody further down the cell block asked, "Two nights left, huh, Joss?"

"Two it is," Joslin said.

"Who knows?" Stuart said. "The governor might wait till the last minute before coming through with a reprieve."

Joslin kicked at the stone floor and watched dust rise. "That's what Smitty was saying till they pushed him west."

He looked down to his left, in the direction toward which Smitty had gone, toward a small door.

"We sat here," he added, "and watched the lights flicker."

From further down, Will Arbenz said, "What you've been talkin' about is crazy. Nobody'd let you. It's against all the rules to let you."

Somebody laughed. The sound was taken up by the others. They laughed heavily, as they did whether an event was funny or only mildly amusing.

bet
I
don't
die

by

ARNOLD

ENGLISH

*Know what it's like waiting for
the chair—the electric chair?*

It was evening. In the other wings of the prison, the men would be finishing dinner and planning ahead. Maybe Joslin's name figured in some of the hushed conversations.

Will Arbenz said huskily, "The chances of a last-minute reprieve are pretty small. If you had a chance, you'd know it. We all have to get used to what's going to happen."

Arbenz was due to go in three months. His gravelly voice and exact knowledge of procedure made Joslin's nerve-ends crawl.

"We can make it a worthwhile bet, Stu," Joslin said, a little nervously. "If I lose, you get my things."

Stuart grunted. "For two weeks," he said dismally.

"Look what you'd be getting." Joslin grinned, tapped the wall between them for emphasis. "My address book, for instance. It's full of girl's names."

"I can sure use it!" Stuart gave that particularly hearty death-cell laugh. "What else?"

"Red tie and blue suit. We're about the same size."

A guard passed on his way to light a cigarette for one of the prisoners. Joslin watched the guard, counted two hundred footsteps from the cell to the station down at the other end.

"Any money in this deal?" Stuart grunted. "Not that I need it, but my missus can use it."

"I've only got about fifty bucks," Joslin said regretfully. "Suppose I win, what do I get?"

"I've got about a hundred dollars downstairs in the property clerk's office."

"Forget the money. What else?"

"Suit, shirt, tie, wallet."

"I don't give a damn what the stakes are. Now, here's the bet." He lowered his voice so that only Stuart would be able to hear. "That even if I don't get a reprieve on Wednesday night, I'll beat the chair that night."

"How?" Stuart was almost hoarse. "You tell me that much or there's no bet."

Joslin took a deep breath. "Here it is: I'm going to kill one of the guards Wednesday night."

Stuart was silent for a full minute, then asked, "What's that got to do with the price of tea in China?"

"Easiest thing in the world, Stu. Kill one of 'em and what happens? Everything stops. New records have to be made, a full investigation has to be held. That means they won't be able to do it then."

"And afterwards?"

"I'll figure something else to keep me out of the chair."

"Won't work," Stuart decided grimly. "They're pretty damn careful around here."

"Maybe they are. Maybe not. Anyhow, that's what the bet's about."

Down the cell block, Will Arbenz was saying loudly to somebody else, "Did your lawyer take advantage of clause 415? A lot of 'em forget that."

Arbenz had written out his own appeals, and told everybody the exact wording. The man's only serious reading matter were books on criminal law, and he probably knew them by heart.

Joslin said suddenly, loudly, "What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock," he was told.

Joslin had purposely smashed his watch on coming into the death house, and been sorry about it ever since. But he knew he'd be laughed at if he bought a watch now.

"It's ten minutes since I asked," he said wonderingly. "For ten minutes I didn't even think about what time it was."

Down at the other end, the cell block door opened and Father Mullins came waddling in, smiling and nodding to all of them, asking if they wanted anything, if they would like to talk to him. Only Arbenz accepted that offer. Joslin, trying to read one of the innumerable pocket edition westerns in his cell, could hear Arbenz' talk to the priest as a low muttering.

Joslin slept somehow. He woke in time to see day-break. He felt sick. Pain laced his stomach. Every five minutes one of the other men, Brent, called out the time.

The day's jokes and semi-wisecracks had already started with somebody asking Arbenz, "Your life insurance paid up?"

One of the guards had thrown in the morning newspaper. Joslin glanced idly through it. The sound of leaves turning in other cells came plainly to him.

Stuart said, "Anybody know a three-letter word for arbitrate?"

Brent, a southerner, was reading aloud the day's installment of the Pogo comic strip. Arbenz complained at an opinion in one of the editorials.

In the last few months, Joslin had taken to smoking; a cigarette was rarely out of his mouth. He didn't want to get up for a light now because of the pain in his stomach.

When he finally arose, and signalled to a guard to light his cigarette, Brent asked him sarcastically, "What do you smoke them things for? You could die of lung cancer."

Lunch was pretty good, as were most of the meals.

In mid-afternoon, under heavy guard, the men were taken out to a special section of the yard. They were permitted to walk or run. Arbenz, with pants rolled up above the knees, did setting-up exercises and counted heavily at each move. Brent stood still, looking calmly up at the sky.

Joslin forced himself to stand absolutely motionless. When Stuart approached, he said, "Don't bother me now." Stuart shrugged and resumed his walk around the rim of the yard. He walked very quickly, hands at his sides.

When the exercise hour was done, the men were marched back to the cells.

In mid-afternoon, Joslin was taken to the visitor's room. He walked heavily, head bowed.

His lawyer waited for him, a tall, gray-haired man. He wore a blue suit. Last time his lawyer had worn a brown one, the time before that a blue sharkskin. The ties were always different, too, usually of hard silk. A black-edged handkerchief always peeped out of a breast pocket.

The two men faced each other across a table in a small room. Armed guards stood at each end of the room.

"I've talked to the governor," the lawyer said. "Going to see him again tomorrow afternoon. I'm doing what I can."

On the way back to his cell, Joslin found himself trying to detect sympathetic looks from the guards.

At about seven-thirty he became grim; the execution had been scheduled for seven o'clock the next night. He resisted the impulse to pace the cell, to smash everything, to rumple and dirty the bed, to scream. He lay back, forcing himself to be quiet.

Stuart rapped lightly on the wall between them.

"Go ahead, Stu. The line's clear."

"Your lawyer say anything, Joss?"

Like the other men, Stuart was always hopeful.

"Nothing I haven't heard before."

"Still in all, you never can tell," Stuart said. "Remember what happened to Smitty, don't you? Twice they put him off, boy. Twice."

Suddenly Stuart's big fist hit the wall. "I killed a girl in five minutes. It didn't take months of torture! No reprieves, no petitions, just my hands around her neck and that was all. If you want to know something, Joss, I think it was damn humane!"

"Hands," Joslin said thoughtfully. "I guess that'll be the way."

"The bet?" Stuart whispered. "That what you mean?"

"Sure. It's probably the one chance I've got."

From a cell further down, Arbenz' voice was raised in anger. "My constitutional rights were disregarded and that voids the conviction. Anybody knows that much."

Joslin's nerves were being stretched almost to the breaking point. Everything irritated him. His nose was running and he felt dust and dirt everywhere.

He didn't sleep at all during the night, but lay awake watching as much sky as he could see from the recessed window above. Toward morning, he was watching the effect of every change in light on the cracks in the ceiling, the never-ending patterns that were being made.

A soft tapping on the wall signalled that Stuart wanted to talk. "You asleep, Joss? I was just thinking, they say it's all over so soon you can't hardly take a deep breath."

Somebody made that remark at least once a day.

"Just the same," Joslin said, "the bet's still on."

He had a recurrence of the pains he'd felt yesterday morning, cutting his stomach in two. He heard every step of the awakening of the men, with interest as if it were all new. Radnik prayed in the morning. Brent was talking to Arbenz about southern cooking. In cell five, McGivern sang something jaunty, then abruptly cut it off.

Men turned the leaves of their morning papers. Brent was reading aloud the day's installment of Pogo. Stuart growled over the sports news.

Joslin was barely conscious of a guard telling him, "Your breakfast's getting cold." When he didn't acknowledge it, the guard said irritably, just like a parent, "There's plenty people in the world would give a fortune for a good breakfast like that one."

Joslin's eyes had started hurting; there was still the pain in his stomach . . .

It seemed impossible that lunch had already been set down near the cell. That time was going so fast made him get up quickly, almost frantically. In a moment, he fell back, breathing heavily.

An assistant warden came along and asked Joslin if he wanted to see any reporters. Joslin didn't answer.

"That isn't getting you anything," the assistant warden snapped. "Do you mind if a couple of reporters are witnesses, tonight? You can tell me if you think any of them are objectionable to you. . . . Okay, if you feel like keeping quiet. You want to send any messages? . . . Okay, okay, you ain't talking."

Joslin had no family. If he'd had one, he would probably have wished he didn't have one.

Because he hadn't said a word to the assistant warden, the idea was getting around that Joslin was numb, paralyzed with grief. The guards were therefore expecting to have an easy time with him.

The assistant warden was talking to somebody else, when Arbenz asked him, "Nothing on Joslin's appeal?"

"Nothing I know about."

"He's got a chance, hasn't he?"

"How should I know!" the assistant warden demanded, and left muttering.

In the afternoon, Joslin was taken to a small room where the prison barber, one of the inmates, shaved his head. Before Joslin left, the inmate called out, "I hope the governor likes you."

When he arrived back at the cell block, Arbenz and Stuart were joking about waiting lists for cells. They stopped abruptly.

Stuart paced his cell. From where he lay, Joslin could hear him cracking his knuckles. Father Mullins arrived, and asked Joslin patiently if he wanted to talk to him. Brent and McGivern began arguing about baseball, began making fantastic bets.

Joslin had been asked for his preference as far as dinner was concerned, but he had said nothing.

When dinner was placed on a small chair outside the cell, he discovered that he was hungry. And if he ate, he thought, he would be sustaining the part he had set himself to play.

He didn't move or talk when told by the assistant warden that his lawyer's final petition had been denied.

He could hear Arbenz ask, "Are you sure?" and mutter, "I'd have thought he was pretty well set."

When McGivern barked out, "Shut up!", Arbenz muttered, "These goddam lawyers, they don't *care* what happens to you!"

Later on, the cell block door opened. Two sets of footsteps approached. Joslin grew tense. He didn't look up, but forced himself to lie still.

The door of his cell was opened.

"Come on, Joslin."

Joslin turned, lay down full on the bed, then rose from it. He was slow and calm. His face looked haggard.

One of the guards, a heavy man shifting the weight on his feet, asked, "You all set?"

He nodded instead of answering. The top of his head, shorn as it was, felt cold. On the threshold of the cell, he touched the bars with one palm, then the other.

He stepped out of the cell. The other men were standing at the bars, watching him intently, carefully.

Stuart called, "Don't break down, fella."

Arbenz said, "You'll be all right. Just take—it easy."

Radnik said intensely, "I'll pray for you, Joss."

The face of one of the guards flushed, for some reason. He was a thin young guy with big eyes.

Joslin walked to the middle of the cell block, his

steps heavy. His features were without expression.

Suddenly he made his move. Turning, hands out, he dived for the thin guard's throat. The other guard swore; at once, Joslin felt blackjack blows about his body.

Other guards ran toward them, those who usually stood in front of the cell block. The pain in Joslin's body grew worse. His eyes swam. He couldn't have seen much anyhow, because of the mass of bodies swarming over him.

The thin guard gurgled and spat, tried to use hands and knees.

Joslin no longer knew what was happening. His whole world was made up of pain. Somebody had hit him in the mouth and warm blood flowed down his throat.

"Use the blackjack!" somebody called out.

The blows around his head increased in tempo and fury. Joslin sensed power leaving his hands. His mouth opened reflexively, as his insides tried to throw up.

He now heard what was being said without making sense of the words, each standing by itself—without meaning. Then, for an instant, clarity returned.

"Schwartz is going to live . . ."

The guard probably, the young one with the big eyes.

"That's more than you can say for *him*."

Words were fading again into a dim consciousness.

"What else could you expect after the blackjack—he took."

"Guess you're right," somebody else said.

"You got to hand it to Joslin, though: he beat the chair after all. . . ."



Poor Prospects

Officials of an aircraft manufacturing company in Forth Worth, Tex., said they had received a letter expressing interest in a helicopter for transportation "in or out of the South American interior." The letter had been written by an inmate of a federal penitentiary.

Wild Vandals

Police stopped looking for vandals who had smashed storm windows stored in a garage at the Phillip Huggins home, Crown Point, Ind., after they found a 12-inch piece of deer antler on the floor. They surmised the animal had wandered into the garage during the night and repeatedly attacked his own reflection in the windows.

THERE were three of them in the office. Three cops. And they kept walking around, hammering at me. From the right, from the left, from over me, yeah, even from down under.

Finally they shut up and one of them stood in front of me, smoking a cigarette. His name was Malone, and he was a pretty decent-acting cop, older but not tough-talking like the other two.

After a long time he said, "How the hell did you get in this mess, Lane?"

I considered it. Yeah, how the hell did I?

Matt Lane, the guy who could run over the biggest tackle the opposition had, *anytime*, the guy who made booting field goals look as easy as tossing

pennies in a sack, the guy who could out-run a horse. That was me. Big Man on Campus at Crawford College.

And five days before graduation in June, the old man came around with a contract.

"Want to try coaching here, Matt?"

"Here?"

"Sure, here. Where else? We have a good bunch of kids coming up and you know our system inside out. We want you, Matt."

So I signed a contract and became an assistant coach at Crawford College. Then in July I married Anne Morrow, a black-haired, blue-eyed kid with a lot of body. She had her senior year at Crawford



College Kill

The cops knew the Jackson girl had died driving her car off the bridge. But they'd never be able to prove that he helped her!

by JACK Q. LYNN

coming up, but we weren't waiting around until she graduated. The next thing, she got pregnant. We weren't sure in September, but by the end of October all of the doubt was gone.

We decided not to tell anybody about the baby, not then, not even Anne's folks who lived downstate. Anne was going home for a visit the second week in November and I planned to whip down there the day before Thanksgiving. We'd spend the holiday with her folks, and we'd tell them about the baby then. It would be one of those holiday surprises.

I put Anne on a train on Monday. The first two days she was gone I was okay. I kept busy with my physical education classes, slipped downtown to Joe's at night and had a few beers, then sacked in early enough to feel good the next day. Wednesday I was restless; it was too damn quiet around our apartment, and Wednesday night I drank as much beer as I could hold. Thursday started out the same, the beer and the grousing around, so I decided to go over to the college library to do a little research on some work I was planning for a master's degree.

An hour later I was at a table in the large library reading room when the girl got up from another table, put a book on the shelf near her, and reached for her coat which was draped over the back of a chair next to where she had been sitting. Her impact on me was jolting. I couldn't get my eyes off of her. She was tall; her skin was a honey-colored tan, and her hair, black as black can be, tumbled from beneath a green beret to very wide shoulders. Her high, full breasts strained against the thin fabric of her dress, and the dress was pleasantly shadowed where it caressed her thighs.

I stared hungrily, feeling excitement begin to knot my stomach muscles.

And then suddenly I found her staring right back at me without moving. It made me feel uncomfortable. I lowered my eyes and shifted in the chair.

She moved then. Shrugging into her coat, she walked toward the front door of the library. For a moment I sat mesmerized, then I started after her, leaving the book I had been reading open on the table. Outside the front door of the library, I put on my heavy jacket and stood on the top step watching her. She was crossing the street in front of me. I went down to the sidewalk. She opened the door of a blue convertible parked at the curb on the opposite side of the street and slid under the steering wheel. I caught a flash of nyloned legs before the door closed. And then, without looking my way, she was gone in a surge of power.

I was suddenly a different guy. I wasn't teaching physical education to a bunch of kids at a small midwest college. I didn't have a wife named Anne. And I didn't have a nice, warm, little apartment two blocks off the campus.

And all because that girl was burned in my mind. I couldn't stop thinking about her.

After my final class Friday afternoon, I went straight from the gymnasium to the library. But the girl wasn't there. Nervous and sweating, I hung around for over an hour, waiting.

The girl didn't show. My disappointment was so bitter I walked downtown to Joe's to drown it. An icy wind seeped right through my coat and crept into my bones, and the first snow of the season was coming down. It was a lousy day. Gray, cold, snowing, and no girl. I had to get the girl out of my system, but I didn't know how. I had another beer. Drinking didn't help. I walked out of Joe's at ten minutes after nine.

I saw the convertible as I hit the street. It was parked at the curb right in front of me. There was a shadow slumped behind the steering wheel and I saw a red cigarette glow in the dark. Then the shadow moved and the car door in front of me opened.

"Get in, Matt," the soft voice of the girl said.

I got in without saying anything. It was a neat car, new, with safety belts and all the trimmings. The girl dropped her cigarette out of the wing window, kicked over the motor of the convertible and pulled away from the curb into the line of traffic. At the first stop light she said, "I've been waiting over an hour."

"How did you know I was at Joe's?"

She laughed softly. "I know plenty about you, Matt Lane—now. I've made inquiries."

I twisted on the seat, opened my coat, and purposely put one knee against her thigh.

She didn't even give me a glance. "My name is Edie Jackson," she said. "My home is in New Orleans. I came up here to school because I wanted to be out on my own."

The windshield wipers whisking the snow from the window made the only sound in the car.

I got out a cigarette and fired my lighter.

"Light two," she said.

She didn't ask me to light two cigarettes. She didn't say please. She just said, "Light two."

I lit two and gave one to her. She glanced at me then and smiled.

"Do you always get what you want?" I asked.

"Almost always. My father is a very wealthy man. And he dotes on me."

"Other than your father?"

"Almost always."

"Like now?"

I saw her frown. "What do you mean?" she said.

"You saw me looking at you in the library yesterday afternoon and for some reason you decided I was for you."

She laughed softly.

"You've got it twisted, haven't you, Matt?" she asked. "Turn it around. *You* want me."

I didn't say anything then. I couldn't.

"Do I shock you, Matt? If I do, you'll have to get used to it. I'm like that. I say what I think, and I do what I want to do."

"I'm not sure I like you," I said slowly.

"But you *want* me. And that's what counts."

She turned the car off of the main thoroughfare onto a sidestreet. We eased along another block, and then she turned into a driveway. I had a look at the house as the headlights swept over it. It was a small place with an attached single car garage. She drove the convertible into the garage and switched off the lights. A light in the back seat popped on when she opened her door.

I reached out suddenly and grabbed her wrist. She had one long leg out of the car. Twisting in the seat, she looked at me and I saw her tiny mocking smile.

"You're taking a lot for granted, aren't you, Miss Jackson?"

"Am I?"

We sat there a long time without moving, measuring each other with our eyes. And then she said, "I live here Matt—alone. Your wife is out of town. Now, do you want to come in for a drink?"

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"You're jailbait. I'm twenty-four."

Her face clouded and she gently twisted her arm out of my grasp. "That's something else you should know about me, Matt. I'm a woman. I'm eighteen in years, but I'm twice that age otherwise. I've had men, plenty of men. Not boys still wet behind the ears, Matt. I hate fumbling, sniveling boys. When I want somebody, he is a *man*!"

She got out of the car then and stood beside the open door, looking in at me. "Coming?"

We went into the house through a kitchen. She pulled the drapes across the windows in the front room before turning on a pair of lamps. I looked around. The room was expensively furnished. There was a fireplace in one wall; three logs were burning slowly. To my left was an open room that had been furnished as a study and behind me was the kitchen. To my right was a closed door.

"The bedroom," Edie said, following the line of my eyes. She smiled then and slipped out of her fur coat. Whisking the green beret off of her head, she said, "Your coat."

I shrugged out of it and she put it with hers in a small closet near the front door.

I looked her up and down then, making no attempt to hide the fact that I was taking a surface inventory. She was wearing slacks; they were dark green and showed off her figure.

My hands felt damp. I wiped them on my thighs.

She smiled and waved her arm toward a low sofa in front of the fireplace. "Make yourself at home, Matt. What'll you have to drink?"

"Anything."

She went into the kitchen. A moment later I

heard the slam of a refrigerator door and then the crack of an ice cube tray being opened. I walked to the kitchen entry and stood there looking at her.

"Bourbon?" she said over her shoulder.

"With something sweet."

She mixed the drinks and we went to the sofa in front of the fireplace. I sat down.

"Do you like music?" she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I like the classics," she said.

There was a record player beside the sofa with a record on it. She clicked a switch on the player and music, low and soft, filled the room. Then she sat down beside me and put her leg against mine all the way up.

I looked at her.

"Why do you want me?" she asked over the rim of her glass, her eyes probing mine.

"Why does a man want any woman?"

"I don't know. That's what I want you to tell me."

I thought about it. Why did I want her? What crazy thing was it that had me sitting with her in the front room of her place? Me, a guy with a helluva sweet wife and a decent future. Why the hell was I here? Why was I jeopardizing everything I had and everything I might have? There didn't seem to be a logical answer.

"You can't tell me?" she said softly.

I stared at my feet. "No."

I felt her hand crawl over my thigh then. "Don't let it bother you, Matt," she said. "I've never had a satisfactory answer either."

I gulped my drink and put the glass on the floor.

"Matt?"

Twisting, I looked up at her. She was smiling cozily.

"I want to dance for you," she said.

"Dance?"

"You'll like it," she said softly.

Too puzzled to move, I sat there on the sofa watching her. She began to sway with the music coming from the record player. Her mouth was fixed in a half-smile, lips open, straight white teeth gleaming. Her eyes became slits. She whirled around the room, head high, breasts straining. I watched her, fascinated. And then she was back in front of me, her body swaying suggestively. I saw her hand go to the buttons on the front of her blouse. The buttons came open and in one swirling motion she stripped out of the blouse and flung it away from her. She wasn't wearing a bra. The naked half of her body was a honey-colored sheen in the lamplight, breasts tip-tilted. She turned her back to me. One hand opened the slacks above her hip and the slacks inched down. Suddenly she whirled around and the slacks dropped to the floor. She stepped out of them and danced forward and into my arms.

I wrapped one hand in her hair and jerked back

her head. Her hands ripped open my shirt as I mashed my lips against hers.

Finally, I picked her up and carried her across the room. She kicked open the closed door.

It was dark in the room and hot. My body was wet with sweat. Edie stirred beside me.

"Cigarette?" she said, and her voice cracked.

I felt her groping toward the table beside the bed. She sat up and a moment later a match flared. She had two cigarettes in her mouth. I watched her light them and then she flicked out the match and stretched out beside me, putting an ashtray on her flat stomach.

We smoked in silence.

After a long while she said, "Tell me all about you, Matt."

I told her. And later, when I had finished, she sucked in a deep breath and said, "Will you stay with me all week end? We won't even have to go out of the house."

I put one arm around her shoulders and squeezed her. "You'll have to blast me out to get rid of me, baby."

She laughed softly then and sat up straight, spilling the ashtray. She reached for a lamp and turned it on, and then brushed the ashes out of the bed and looked down at me. She was smiling.

"I've got a secret," she said slyly.

"Yeah?"

She turned away from me and leaned over the side of the bed. I heard metal clicking against metal and I started to shove up on one elbow.

"No," she said without looking at me. "Just stay where you are."

I heard a sharp click then, and a whirring noise. After that her soft laughter. Then her voice: *Talk dirty to me, Matt. I love it.*

A shiver went up my back as I heard my own voice. The things I said almost made me sick.

Her voice came on again. *Beautiful, Matt. More. Tell me more.*

My voice was hardly more than a harsh, rasping whisper, but it was clear and audible.

Edie dropped one arm over the side of the bed and I heard a click. It became ominously silent in the room. I wasn't sure of what I was going to do. And then I was on her fast, my balled fist pounding viciously into her belly. A hard object smashed against my head, stopping me.

I flopped back on the bed as I clutched my head. Edie leaned over me; there was a glass ashtray in her hand. Her face was not a good thing to see.

"Don't ever do that again!" she shouted.

"You dirty, rotten—" The words flowed out of my mouth. Some of them I'd never used before in my life.

"You know all of the dirty names, don't you?"

I stared up at her. "Why, Edie? Why a tape recording?"

"It's a hobby," she said, grinning nastily. "A profitable hobby."

Quite a few things drifted into place then. And all of a sudden I thought I understood why she had been waiting for me outside of Joe's. Or did I?

"There's no rich father in New Orleans, is there, Edie?"

"My old man was a seaman. I never saw him in my life."

"And I guess you never lived in New Orleans. But—but why'd you pick me. A college boy. I haven't got a hundred bucks to my name."

I got to her with that. She frowned down at me and shook her head. Then, "I don't know. I don't really know why you. I guess maybe it was the way you looked at me in the library."

"Sweet Jesus!"

"I know you don't have money. Not my kind of money. But—"

She let it hang there, searching for words.

"I won't give you a dime, Edie."

"I don't want a dime—from you."

I pushed her away and sat up. "Okay, it's been fun. You've had your kicks. Now give me that tape."

She sat up on the edge of the bed and reached toward the floor. I turned my back to her and started to scoot out of the bed.

"Matt?"

I twisted around. She was up on one knee on the bed, leaning toward me. Her arm was raised high above her head. There was a spike-heeled shoe in her hand. I wasn't fast enough. The heel crashed down on my head. Blackness hit me fast. I didn't even have the sensation of sinking into the bed.

I wasn't sure how long I was out. When I came around I was only sure of the sharp pains, like shooting needles, stabbing my mind. I opened my eyes, blinked, and closed them.

"Headache, Matt?"

Her voice came from above me. I opened my eyes again. She was sitting on the edge of the bed beside me, smoking a cigarette. She had put on a white gown. It was diaphanous and under it every flowing curve of her tanned body was visible and beautiful.

"I'm sorry I had to do that," she said. "But I had to hide the tape."

"You bitch!"

She smiled. Calmly, she butted her cigarette in an ashtray on her lap and put the ashtray on the floor. Turning slightly, she leaned over me. The front of her gown parted and the ring dropped on my chest. I looked down at it. It was a plain gold ring, no stones, just a gold band. And it was looped in a heavy gold chain around her neck.

It was my wedding ring.

I reached for it and started to jerk the chain from her neck, but her hand covered mine, stopping me.

"I want it, Matt. At least for this week end." Her eyes bored into mine.

"For God's sake, why?"

"I don't know," she said with a tiny smile curving her mouth. "I don't really know."

My hand with the ring in it flinched and her grip tightened. "I said I want it, Matt. Now please be a good boy. Don't be difficult. Don't force me to mail our little tape to Morgansville."

"Morgansville?" I said in surprise.

"That's where your wife is, isn't it? Mrs. Matt Lane, care of T. M. Morrow, Morgansville, Illinois."

I loosened my grip on the ring gradually. Then, "Has it ever occurred to you, baby, that I might be quite capable of killing you?"

"Yes. Yes, it has. But if you stop and think about it, Matt, killing me will only make things worse for you. You'd be wanted for murder then. As it is, you're not wanted for anything—by the police. Right now all you have to do is be a real nice boy for one week end. Real nice to me. And then you get your ring back and a tape recording and a nice neat return to a dull life."

I heard it, but I couldn't believe it. People like Edie just didn't exist.

I said, "You're crazy, Edie."

She shook her head slowly, her face tight. "No, not crazy. Maybe sick, but not crazy."

"Sick?"

"Some doctors say nymphomania is a sickness. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. I don't know. All I know is, I've had it as long as I can remember. Even when I was a little girl . . ."

There was a long silence and I didn't break it.

Finally, she said, "The only difference between me and most of the other girls like me, I'm cashing in on it."

"Okay," I said wearily. "I might have sixty-eight bucks in the bank. I'm not sure. But whatever is there, you can have. Just give me my ring and that tape and—"

She was shaking her head. "No. I told you, Matt, I don't want a dime from you."

"Well, my God, what do you want?"

"Just you, for the next two days and nights."

I could hardly believe what my ears had heard.

"You're a big man, Matt." Her hands rubbed my chest. "Muscular. Strong. I need you."

I stared up at her. And then suddenly it was all very funny. I began to laugh and I said, "I've been a lot of things in my twenty-four years, baby. But a stud for a week-end? Never."

She didn't say anything. She just put her head on my chest and stroked me slowly with one hand, as the full length of her was pressed tight against me. That changed my mind faster than anything she could have said.

We didn't leave the house until Sunday night. We didn't eat much, we didn't drink much, and

we didn't sleep much. It was a crazy, unbelievable week end for me.

I tried to find the tape, of course, but without luck.

Early Sunday evening, Edie wanted to go for a drive. It was to be my last night with her. Monday morning she was to turn me loose with the tape and my ring.

The night was clear and cold. It was early. There was no moon, but the stars were out and the night was light. Edie drove the convertible north past the Crawford campus and out of town. There wasn't much traffic on the highway. We eased along comfortable at forty miles an hour. Our conversation was idle and inconsequential. About ten miles north of town, we arrived at the river bridge. Edie slowed the convertible. We crossed the bridge, and then she turned off the highway onto a rutted lane. We topped a rise and dropped onto a deserted stretch of sand along the river. She stopped the car and switched off the lights. The only sounds were night sounds and the soft slapping of the slow-moving river.

Edie reached for me.

I looked at her in surprise. "Here?"

Thirty minutes later we were driving back into town.

"It's almost ended, Matt," she said softly.

"If I said that grieves me, I'd be a liar."

She looked at me. "Really, Matt? Don't you feel anything towards me?"

"If I told you how I really felt, baby—" It was then that I saw the figure of the man in our headlights. He was facing us in a half-crouched position, his arms thrown above his head as if to ward off the onslaught of the powerful body of steel almost on him.

"Edie, Edie, look out!"

I felt the violent swerve of the convertible as she jerked the wheel. The loud thump that I heard brought horror rushing up inside me. And then terror gripped me, for instead of stopping, Edie had tromped on the accelerator. I looked back through the rear window and was just able to distinguish a dark form sprawled in a circle of lamplight on the street.

"Stop, Edie! Good God, stop! You hit a man!"

"Shut up!"

She turned into a sidestreet at the first corner, raced two blocks, and then turned again. I sat in stunned silence all the way to her house. I guess I really didn't want to go back to the man she'd hit, not any more than she did. Inside the garage, she got out of the car quickly and pulled down the garage door.

I slid across the front seat slowly and got out.

Edie was in front of the convertible, examining it. "Smashed the fender a little on your side," she said, coming to me.

We walked into the house together. When we

reached the kitchen, she moved up close to me and hooked her hands behind my shoulders. "I couldn't stop, Matt. I couldn't stop because of you."

"Because of me?" I said.

"What would it look like in the newspapers tomorrow? Your name and mine. Your wife—"

"But we might have been able to help that man, Edie."

"Sure. And then again, maybe he just got up and walked on home."

"Not him. I saw him. He was flat on the street and—"

She fastened her mouth on mine, stopping my words. I jerked my head away from her and shoved her away from me.

She straightened. The surprised look of realization appeared in her eyes.

"Matt, you're frightened!"

"You're damn right I am!"

"Don't be," she said, coming close to me again. "Please don't be. When a man's frightened he's no good—for anything."

I grasped her shoulders and threw her away from me. She hit a wall hard and slid down to the floor. Staring down at her, I was suddenly sick to my stomach. I thought I was going to vomit. I drew back my foot.

"No, Matt! Don't!"

The toe of my shoe sinking deep into her stomach was the best feeling I'd had in three days.

I went into the front room then and sat down on the low sofa in front of the fireplace. My thoughts were scrambled and I tried to get them in order.

A long time later I heard Edie crossing the front room behind me. She was sobbing softly. I didn't look around at her, and she didn't say anything. She went into the bedroom and closed the door.

That night I cat-napped on the sofa.

I was up early. The paper boy came up the front walk about six-thirty. I had to force myself to wait until he was out of sight. Then I got the paper off of the small front porch.

The story was right there on page one, a full column.

"Well?"

I looked up. Edie was standing in the bedroom doorway, staring at me. She was barefooted and in a robe that she held tight to her throat.

"He's dead," I said. "He died in the hospital about an hour after we hit him. He had three kids."

In a sudden flare of anger, I threw the newspaper at her. She came into the room and picked it up off the floor. I watched her read the story. Her face didn't reveal how she felt. When she had finished, she dropped the paper in a chair and went back into the bedroom.

I knew then what I had to do.

I stirred up the fire in the fireplace and put on another log. The story said there had been no witnesses, but the police had found some particles of

paint on the dead man's clothing. They expected to be able to match the paint with that on the car that was involved.

Expected to match it!

I knew they *would* match it—eventually. And when they did, I'd be just as guilty as Edie.

There was only one thing for me to do. Only one out. I had to get rid of Edie and the convertible.

When she came back into the front room a long time later, she was wearing a red turtleneck sweater, tight-fitting white slacks, and moccasins. And in her hand was a tape recording. She walked right up to where I was sitting on the sofa and held the tape out to me.

"Good-by, Matt."

I took the tape without saying anything and threw it in the fireplace and watched it burn. Facing her then, I said, "My ring."

She stood in front of me. "Get it," she said, arching her back.

I don't know what she expected. Maybe she figured I couldn't touch her without wanting her. If that was it, she knew different right away. I slid my hand under the red sweater, at her waistline, and up until my fingers found the ring. Then I jerked. The chain cut into her neck all right, because she flinched. I pulled the chain out of the ring and threw it toward the fireplace. Then I put the ring on my finger where it belonged and sat down on the sofa.

"I thought you wanted to leave," she said.

"Tonight."

"Tonight?"

I didn't answer her.

I thought the day would never end. I killed most of it with a bottle in my hand. I didn't get drunk; I couldn't afford to do that. I just got a sharp edge and held it. Edie made a couple of stabs at quizzing me, but finally gave up. She prowled the house, restlessly. But I didn't let her bother me. I had just one worry. Would the cops somehow trace the murder car to Edie's place before dark? If they did . . .

I wouldn't let myself think about that.

At eight o'clock, straight up, I smashed an empty bourbon bottle on Edie's head. She had been sitting in a wing-chair with her back to me, reading a magazine. When I walked up behind her and hit her, she slid out of the chair and sank to the carpet without a sound. I dropped what remained of the bottle.

If the blow had killed her, it would have saved me further trouble. But it hadn't. I found her heartbeat, when I put my hand to her body.

I moved quickly. I got Edie into her fur coat and then shrugged into my own coat. I turned off all of the lights. Edie wasn't heavy. I carried her out to the garage and put her in the front seat of her convertible.

This was the risky part. If the cops were scouting

around for a dark blue convertible, I was going to be in trouble.

I backed out of the garage and turned north. I stayed off of the main thoroughfare as long as I could and watched my speed and all of the neighborhood stop signs. My route took me behind the Crawford campus, but just two blocks beyond the college I had to swing out to the highway. I headed north again and drove at a moderate speed. I slowed at the river bridge, crossed the bridge, and turned off of the highway onto the same rutted lane Edie and I had been down Sunday night. On the sandy stretch of ground at the edge of the river I swung the convertible in a wide U turn, switched off the headlights, and drove back onto the rutted lane and stopped.

Dragging Edie out of the car, I stretched her out on the lane in front of the right wheel of the convertible, I had to be sure she died. And I had to be sure she died the right way. Then, before I could think about it too much, I jumped in the car and drove it over her body. I didn't hear a sound from her. I drove the car back and forth over her three times and then I got out again and stuck my hand inside her coat over her heart. Her chest felt like it had slipped a little to one side. There was no heartbeat.

Lifting her, I carried her around to the driver's side of the car and, finally, managed to shove her under the steering wheel. I hooked the safety belt around her middle, to make sure she didn't slip out of the car before I wanted her to, rolled down the window beside her, and kept the door open. Pushing against her, I was able to squeeze part way under the steering wheel. Then I drove to within a few yards of the highway, where I braked. I got out and walked up to the highway.

There were no headlights in either direction. I ran back to the convertible and squeezed in beside Edie again, drove the car onto the highway, and backed down the road several hundred yards. Switching on the headlights, I gunned the motor. The car rolled smooth. I hit thirty, forty, fifty miles an hour—and I was on the bridge. I swung the front door wide, whipped the steering wheel to the right and bailed out. The last thing I remembered was the crash as the convertible ripped through the bridge railing and plunged into the river.

I wasn't sure how long I was out. When I came around, all I knew was that I was flat on my face on the concrete. I rolled over and sat up. My hands burned smartly. My knees were cut open and there was a gash on my head just below my hairline. Blood dribbled down into my left eye, blinding me.

I finally got to my feet and staggered over to the hole in the bridge railing. It was too dark to see anything down below, but the bubbling sound coming up to me was loud. I turned then and

that's when I saw the figure of the man walking across the bridge toward me.

"Hey, mister," the figure said, "were you in—"

That was all I heard. I ran as fast as I could off of the bridge, went down through a ditch and over a fence into a field.

One hundred yards into the field I stopped running and turned toward town. It was slow going, but it was the only way. I couldn't risk being seen, and I had to get to my apartment before daylight.

I walked at a steady pace, vaulting the fences as I came to them. The highway was to my left and I kept it in sight. I hadn't covered too much ground when I saw the winking red light winging along the highway. I stopped and watched it until it was out of sight. If that was the highway patrol or an ambulance heading for the bridge, it meant somebody had already found the convertible.

The first red-gray streaks of dawn edged the horizon, when I hit the city limits. I followed the alleys to my apartment. I cleaned up. Much as I felt like it, I couldn't chance going to bed. It was imperative I be on schedule all day. So I sat in a deep chair in the front room and chain-smoked cigarettes until the paper boy arrived.

It was all there, right on page one.

A girl, identified as Edie Jackson, 18, of New Orleans, had apparently driven her car off of the river bridge ten miles north of town. The county sheriff tentatively had identified her convertible as the car that had struck and killed a Crawford man on Sunday evening. The paint on the car matched the particles found on the victim's clothing.

I read the rest of the story fast.

Miss Jackson, a freshman student at Crawford College, was found strapped in a safety belt when sheriff's officers pulled the car from the river. She was dead.

The sheriff speculated that the girl may have become depressed after fleeing from the Sunday night accident scene and committed suicide.

However, an air of mystery surrounded the discovery of the car in the river.

Harold Stribling, an itinerant, was asleep under the river bridge when the car plunged off about eight forty-five last night. Stribling said he ran up to the highway to secure aid as soon as he realized what had happened.

On the highway, he claims to have seen a man who ran from the scene when he called to him. Stribling then went to a nearby farm house and called the sheriff's office.

Stribling told authorities he would not be able to positively identify the man, but . . .

I couldn't read any more.

I had a full schedule of classes that day. They were pure hell. I managed to get through the morning sessions; then shortly after one o'clock

that afternoon a man walked into the gymnasium. I watched him with some apprehension as he talked to a student, and then the student pointed to me. The man came toward me.

"You're Matt Lane?" he said.

"Yes," I said huskily.

He showed me a badge. "You'll have to come downtown with me, Mr. Lane."

I'd never been inside a police station before . . .

Now the soft-talking cop named Malone was standing in front of me, smoking a cigarette.

"Let's start all over again, Lane," he said. "Did you know this Jackson girl?"

I got a grip on myself. "If you mean the girl," I said, "who drove her car off of the river bridge last night, no, I didn't know her."

"How come you know she drove her car off the bridge?"

"I read about it in the paper this morning."

"She was a freshman student at the college."

"I teach physical education and coach. There are no girls in my classes."

"You're positive then that you didn't know the Jackson girl?"

"Positive."

He sucked in a deep breath and looked at one of the other cops. "Play it, Simpson."

The cop pushed away from a wall and walked toward a record player. I leveled my eyes on him. What the hell was going on? The cop snapped a switch and the next voice I heard was Edie's!

Then my own!

I couldn't move. I tried to swallow. It was a frame!

I was being framed by someone who was dead!

The cop snapped the switch, cutting off the recorder.

"Now, Mr. Lane . . ." Malone said. He let it

hang there.

I knew, of course, what Edie had done to me. The tape I had burned at her place the previous day—I hadn't played it to be sure that it was my own!

"We found several other tapes, Lane, but this particular one—"

"Okay," I said, interrupting Malone, "so I lied about knowing her. I just didn't want to get involved. I got a wife. You know how those things are. That's all—"

He cut me off. "There's a couple of things mighty peculiar about the Jackson girl's death. Medical examination turned up a large bump on her head. Too, her chest was crushed and the lungs punctured. She could have received these injuries in the crash, but—well, we found the girl strapped into the car by a safety belt. And we don't figure it's too likely she hit the steering wheel hard enough to crush her chest seeing as the belt wasn't broken."

He paused and looked at me steadily.

I wanted to run. But where?

"The truth of it is, Lane, we found tire marks on the girl's clothing, glass in her hair, and this in the front room of her house."

He opened a desk drawer and held up the top quarter of a broken bourbon bottle. He held it gingerly by the jagged edge.

"There are fingerprints on this, Lane. Are they yours?"

Hang on, boy, I told myself. Hang on tight. They still haven't got you cold.

But I knew they'd get me eventually. They always did. And before I knew it, I was talking, telling them everything.

They put it on tape. And later they had it on paper and the paper in front of me. They wanted me to sign my name.

I did.



Evidence

Tokyo police arrested Motoyoshi Kono, a pickpocket. In his briefcase they found 60 wallets, 57 railroad passes, 12 bank books and 90 photos of girls.

Honored Cops

Two Trenton, N. J., patrolmen were astonished when they were congratulated by a man they arrested. They apprehended Joseph Edwards, 36, after he broke into a commercial building. "I've been stealing things for 27 years and this is the first time I've been caught red-handed," Edwards said. "Congratulations."

RAZOR,

She threw despairing looks over her shoulder, and each time he was a little closer with the weapon raised high and eager.

RAZOR,

gleaming bright

by

ROY

CARROLL



WAITING for Mr. and Mrs. Carson, Gretta fell asleep on the living room couch. Hers was a shallow, troubled slumber, shot through with a dream.

She was in a long, narrow corridor of darkness, a faint light shimmering at the far end. She couldn't see the walls, but each time she tried to escape, she ran into them.

The corridor tipped and tilted in such a way as to make her dizzy. And down it rang his laughter, echoing as in a great, empty chamber.

She threw despairing looks over her shoulder, and each time he was a little closer with the weapon raised high and eager.

It was a razor, and it threw out a phosphorescent glow. It loomed over her, larger and larger. His face was somewhere in the background. A pale blob. She couldn't see him clearly, only the razor. His laughter rose higher and higher until it filled the whole corridor.



She renewed her efforts to get away. Her heart beat wildly. A faint hope was born in her. She was gaining on him now. Leaving him behind.

Then the corridor tipped up at an angle too steep for her to hold her footing. She fell to her knees. Her toes dug to get her feet beneath her once again. Her hands clawed the hard, slick floor of the corridor until the nails tore loose.

With a gasp of despair, she knew her efforts were useless. She began sliding down the corridor. It was like a slick chute.

She slid faster and faster. Straight toward the man with the razor. It became a giant razor. It came slashing down . . .

She screamed as a hand shook her. She snapped awake with a nervous jerk of her whole body that almost threw her off the couch.

She pulled back, rigid, staring at the face before her.

Mrs. Carson said, "My dear, whatever is the matter? You were carrying on dreadfully in your sleep."

"Was I?" Gretta felt the fine beads of sweat on her face. Her heart was still hammering and her breath was short. The razor had seemed so certain to claim her that it was hard for a moment to realize that she was here in the Carson's apartment with Mrs. Carson's plump middle-aged face before her filled with concern.

Mr. Carson stood beside his wife, still in his topcoat and hat. Where the years had pleasantly softened his wife, they had had the opposite effect on him. He somehow reminded Gretta of a hard, coiled spring. All his movements were brisk. His face was narrow with each bone sharp and clear beneath the stretched mask of skin.

"Are you ill, Gretta?" he inquired. His tone indicated that he had no real feeling about the matter. He never used any other tone.

"No, sir," Gretta said.

Mrs. Carson did not dismiss her concern easily. She was a sweet, vague woman. Stupid, Gretta had decided upon first meeting her. But rather kind.

"Perhaps you've eaten something that upset you and gave you a nightmare, dear," Mrs. Carson said.

"No, not at all," Gretta said. Her voice was cool. She was rapidly gaining possession of herself. She was both ashamed and angry that they should have seen her show of weakness. She stood up, a short, rather heavy set girl. She wore her usual severe, tailored suit. Her face was without makeup, her brows thicker than most girls because she didn't pluck them.

As she turned to get her coat from the living room cloak closet, Gretta felt Mrs. Carson's gaze following her. Gretta could almost read the thoughts behind the puffy features. If Gretta had eaten something here to make her sick, maybe Gretta wouldn't come again. And that would be a

calamity in Mrs. Carson's selfish little world. For Gretta wasn't like most girls of her age, flighty, their minds filled with thoughts of boys, boys, boys. Mrs. Carson wouldn't trust her two precious children with just any sitter. Mr. and Mrs. Carson hadn't married until late in life. Mrs. Carson had given birth to two children, a boy and girl, before natural changes common to her years had precluded further results. As a consequence, Gretta thought she doted over the children with an affection that was stupid, vain, and a little sickening.

"Here," Mr. Carson said suddenly. "I'll bet this is what brought on the nocturnal horrors."

Gretta turned. Mr. Carson had picked up the newspaper from the couch. Gretta had been reading it, pondering over what she had read, just before she had fallen asleep.

The paper rattled in Mr. Carson's hand. "Razor killer claims a third victim," he read. "The body of an elderly man, his throat slashed with a razor . . ."

Mrs. Carson clapped her hands over her ears. "Oh, please dear, I can't bear to hear such horrid stuff."

Mr. Carson looked at his wife with contempt. Then he turned his gaze toward Gretta. "You were reading this when you dozed off?"

Gretta nodded.

"Ah," said Mr. Carson, "you see. That did it. I'll bet your mind pictured all sorts of things. The rustle of the wind outside became his footsteps creeping up the fire escape. A touch of moonlight at the window was his face."

"Please, please," Mrs. Carson said. "I'd die at the thought of him ever coming here. Oh, my precious darlings . . ."

She rushed across the room, down a short hallway, and there came to the living room the sound of her opening a door. She returned in a moment, fanning her face with a limp hand. "They're sleeping like angels, the dears. Please, let's have a cup of tea. I do need something to brace me. Why don't they catch that horrid man and take his razor away from him?"

"I guess they're trying," Mr. Carson said.

"Oh, I suppose so," his wife said. "But why don't they *do* something? He's operating in this end of town. We have no idea when he might—oh, dear, I think we really should hire someone to protect the children."

"You mean a bodyguard?" Mr. Carson asked.

"Don't you think it would be a good idea, dear?"

Mr. Carson laughed in sour humor. "The man we hired might be the very one. He could be any Tom, Dick, or Harry. Outwardly, by day, a respectable business man even. You never know. He could be living in this very building."

Gretta slipped quickly into her coat, pulling her eyes from Mr. Carson's face. Mrs. Carson let a short, quick breath out of her red, puffy lips. "It's dread-

ful. I won't sleep a wink—Oh, Gretta, must you go now?"

"Yes, ma'm."

"Oh, dear, that long walk you have . . ."

"It's only six or eight blocks."

"But alone . . . So late . . ."

"I'll be all right."

"Let Mr. Carson take you."

"Sure," Mr. Carson said. "I'll drive you over, Gretta."

He looked at her, and she was aware of her youth and his age. How old and repulsive he became suddenly, looking at her in that way!

"No," she said, "you don't have to bother."

"It's no bother."

"I said no!" Gretta said.

"Well," Mrs. Carson said. "We were only thinking of you, dear, trying to be nice."

"But I think you need him here more."

"I am upset," Mrs. Carson admitted.

"You see? Well, good night."

Gretta left the apartment, closed the door quickly behind her. She hesitated in the hallway a moment. Memory of the dream she'd had on the couch tried to come creeping back into her mind. She shook her head and walked quickly down the hallway.

It was late and the sidewalks were dark, deserted, and in this residential section there were few automobiles moving on the street at this hour. Across the street, a delicatessen was just closing, and down on the corner, the lights of a bar looked lonely.

Gretta started resolutely down the sidewalk. She fought thoughts of the razor fiend from her mind. She was afraid even of the thought of him, so afraid that a shiver, almost like a shiver of pleasure, passed over her.

She must put her mind to thinking of something else. Something deep, heavy, engrossing. She had a very brilliant mind, she knew. So much so that it set her apart, made her a kind of lone wolf. Girls were too frilly and boys too silly when they were her age. She knew all about Existentialism and could follow the torturous turns and twists of the philosophy of Nietzsche.

It all made for a great deal of loneliness when girls knew only to giggle about a dance and boys pawed at you with their revolting hands.

There'd been a boy once. Anthony. Her first year in high. Frail and gentle he had been, and her heart had gone out to him. They used to walk, he holding her hand shyly, and talk real talk about political philosophy and economic systems.

Then Anthony's parents had moved away and taken him with them, of course. She'd cried for two whole days, brittle hard tears, and had told herself that she would never be the same again.

Engrossed in her thoughts, she passed the lighted bar with only a vague realization that it was there. She crossed the intersection, reaching the dark corner where business establishments had closed

hours before.

It was then that she thought she heard footsteps. They were sharp, rapid.

She glanced over her shoulder, her heart almost stopping. There was no one.

She began shivering. The street seemed to have grown colder. How much further to her home? Five, six blocks. How could she ever manage to walk that distance?

She took a faltering step, another. Her right hand was against the building for support. Suddenly, the support wasn't there. She had reached the corner of the building, was standing at the mouth of an alley. Heat seeped from the buildings into the alley and out of the alley over her.

She stood as if clinging to the warmth for a moment. And while she was there, a car came down the street. Light glided before it. Touched her briefly. Then the car stopped at the curb.

She threw her startled glance toward it. The door of the car opened. A man was getting out.

He came around the car. He stood looking at her the way he had looked at her in the apartment.

"You forgot your money, Gretta," Mr. Carson said. "And Mrs. Carson was so fearful about your walking alone . . ."

He was coming toward her. She took a step back into the alley.

"No," she said.

"Now, Gretta, it was only a dream. You're not still upset, are you?"

She walked backward into the alley, staring at him. Why hadn't she realized? The fiend could be anybody. A respectable business man, even. He had said so himself. He'd been having his private joke up there in the apartment talking about the fiend as he had.

"Gretta!" he said sharply as he moved after her.

A feeling of calm came over her. Her hand came up slowly, dipped into her bosom, came out holding the razor. It was an old-fashioned razor. She'd found it one day while rummaging through the attic for old books. The weight of it in her hand had given her a strangely pleasant feeling.

Mr. Carson was quite close to her now. She could see the anger on his face. Then something quite different was there as he saw the razor.

She struck quick and hard with all her young strength. The razor bit. Deep. Clean.

She saw him clutch his throat and fall.

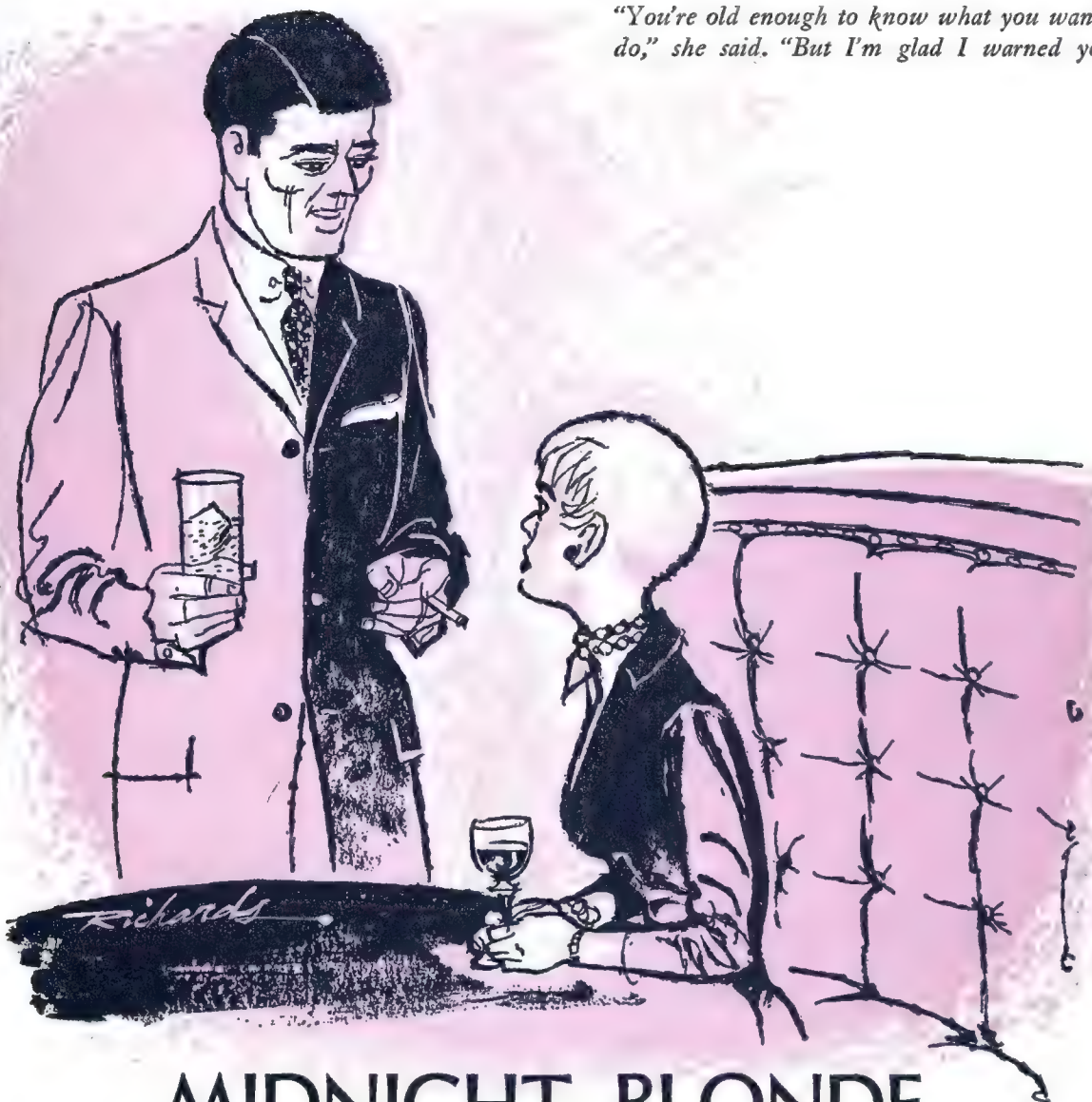
She bent over him to look at the evil fiendishness in his face. Then she wiped the razor on his coat, replaced it under her tailored blouse and walked out of the alley.

She moved down the sidewalk without fear. She could go home now. Home to her room and deep, deep thoughts. The razor had saved her. The fiend was dead.

She knew.

Hadn't she had to kill him four times?

"You're old enough to know what you want to do," she said. "But I'm glad I warned you."



MIDNIGHT BLONDE

by

TALMAGE POWELL

THE GIRL sat alone in the curved leather booth of the bar. A half consumed glass of sherry was on the table before her. She made no move to touch it. She sat with her hands in her lap. She had sat this way, absolutely motionless, for the past ten minutes.

A man entered the bar. His brief first glance at the girl became a lingering one as he slowly passed her booth. In looking at her with appreciation, he joined the company of every man in the place. There was little talk. And not a moment passed that at least one man wasn't glancing toward

the girl who sat there, unmoving and alone.

She seemed unaware of the undefinable something she had brought into the bar. It wasn't her beauty alone that attracted attention. She was small, but very shapely. Dressed in black. She wore her glossy blonde hair cut short, with a hint of curl at the ends, and casual bangs that accentuated the dreamy quality of her large dark eyes. Her smooth tanned complexion heightened further the hint of ageless mystery in her eyes.

Yet for all the enticement and sophistication of the girl there was a quality of terrible innocence

about her. This quality reached out and made men at the bar feel more masculine than they had in a long time. It reached out and touched them, and some of them would therefore remember her before they went to sleep that night, or while answering absent-mindedly the question of a wife.

Her eyes stayed on the clock behind the bar. It was a pretentious clock, ringed with orange neon, its face illuminated by a pale orange glow. The hands indicated that the time was exactly nineteen minutes before twelve. The clock was ten minutes fast, an aid in getting the last, lingering customers out of the bar by legal closing time.

Twenty-nine minutes before midnight.

The girl's lips parted; she had small, gleaming, even teeth. The pink tip of her tongue touched her lips briefly. She sipped the sherry at last.

Twenty-eight minutes.

The man who had just entered the bar continued to look at her over his shoulder while he walked to the bar and ordered a highball.

The bartender put the drink before him. The man raised his brows in a question, making it clear by a jerk of his head in the girl's direction that he was asking about her. The bartender glanced toward the girl and shrugged.

The man tasted his drink, turned slowly, and stared boldly at the girl.

She was still watching the clock.

Twenty-seven minutes.

Holding his drink, the man moved across the short intervening distance until he was standing beside the booth. He was a tall, rangy man of about thirty, dark in coloring, nice looking without being handsome. He stood without speaking for a moment; then he said, "Hello."

The girl looked at him. He took a quick breath as those luminous eyes of hers met his.

"What did you say?"

He smiled. "I said hello."

"Oh—hello."

"May I buy you a drink?"

"I have one," she said quietly. It was neither a rebuff nor an invitation. She continued looking at him, studying him. He took a quick pull at his drink as if he were losing his poise.

"Are you waiting for someone?" he asked.

He was the center of attention now. Not open attention. Guarded glances. Nobody was drinking right now. The bartender was busy with his bar cloth, but the movement was strictly mechanical.

The man's face reddened a little, as the girl took a long time in answering.

"Yes," she said finally, "I am waiting for someone, I suppose."

The invitation was there now, in her low voice, her eyes, but the man hesitated—as if there were something he failed to understand. For an instant, as he turned his back to the bar, he appeared sorry that he had started the whole business.

He glanced over his shoulder again at her, however, caught the eyes that quickly cut away. His smile returned as he took his poise back in hand.

"We could say you were waiting for me," he said with an attempt at lightness.

"Yes, we could."

"Then may I sit down?"

"By all means. And come to think of it, I'll have another sherry."

The man sat down. Like an almost audible rustle, attention was turned from him. Men were drinking again, discussing baseball, business, women in low tones. The man had carried the ball into the end zone. He had done what every man in the place would have liked to do. He had picked up the girl, made the conquest.

Yet he was not completely at ease.

The girl was still looking at the clock.

Twenty-two minutes.

Her gaze didn't waver even when the bartender brought her sherry. Her profile was delicate and lovely; but a large part of her wasn't there, staring like that at the clock.

The man coughed politely.

She turned to look at him. "Oh, I am sorry," she said. "Thank you for the sherry."

"You live around here?" he asked. "I haven't seen you before."

"I just came to town."

"I hope you'll like it here. It's a nice little burg, though it gets pretty cold in winter."

"I think I'll like it very much," she said, "for as long as I'm here." She smiled at the man. Up close, her teeth had a faintly pointed look.

The man cleared his throat. "By the way, my name's Larry."

"Mine's Jeannine."

"It rather fits you," he said.

"Does it?"

"I mean, innocent and yet kind of—unknowable."

Little sparks went off deep in her eyes. "I think I like that."

She looked again at the clock.

Nineteen minutes.

Her cheeks became pink; in her eyes the sparks became a flare of excitement.

"Do you work here in town?" Larry asked. "Transferred here maybe?"

"What?"

"I asked if you worked here."

"Oh, no, I'm visiting a friend. A girl who was my roommate in college. I haven't seen her since she was married. I've been in Florida."

"Nice down there."

"It depends on what happens to you."

His brows raised. "Only something nice could happen to someone like you."

"Is that the beginning of a line?"

"No. I mean it. Really. Anybody who'd even think anything bad about you should be treated

like a mad dog. They'd be out of their minds."

Her face pinked with pleasure. She sipped her sherry and looked at him over the rim of her glass. He tossed off his second drink and ordered a third.

Her eyes were on the clock again.

Sixteen minutes.

He tossed off his drink straight. He was beginning to feel them. He signalled for another before she had touched her fresh sherry.

"Listen," he said. "I think that clock's got you hypnotized."

"Is my looking at it that noticeable?"

"I guess it is," he said. "I just noticed, didn't I?"

She smiled; there was a trace of invitation in it now. "Why don't you have another drink?"

He hesitated, as if there were something he didn't understand. Something strange. Something that only a deep seated instinct reached out and touched. Then he gave a what-the-devil shrug and ordered another drink.

"If you're planning to find work here," he said, "maybe I could help you. I run a fairly good real estate business. Belong to some clubs. Know quite a few people."

"Are you married?"

"No."

She smiled. "You hesitated. You are married."

"Well, I don't see much of her."

"Misunderstood husband?"

"No, I just don't like her. But there are two kids and . . ." His voice trailed off.

"It makes no difference," she said. "But aren't you gambling a lot?"

"You mean, just sitting here, talking to you?"

"Well, you're a respectable businessman, you say. A family man. Scandal would hurt you very much."

"My wife knows how I feel about her."

"Oh, well, that does make things simpler for you, doesn't it."

"I suppose you could say that."

"Simpler for us," she said softly.

In the dim light of the bar, she was a gifted artist's most beautiful creation. Almost too lovely to be real.

His breath quickened. "I think we're going to understand each other."

"You'll never understand me," she said.

"I'll try."

"You shouldn't try too hard. I warn you."

"Instead of a warning, I'll have a drink," he said.

"You're old enough to know what you want to do," she said. "But I'm glad I warned you."

He smiled expansively. "I know how to take care of myself."

"I knew you'd say that."

"How did you know?"

"I know you quite well."

"How could you?" he laughed. "I only met you minutes ago."

"No, I met you a long time ago. In many different places. There are a lot of men like you in the world, Larry. Wife, couple of kids, a business—all pretty light stuff when they're weighed against a thrill."

"Hey, you need a drink."

"All right."

"None of that lecture stuff. How do you like that—we meet the way we did, and you start a lecture."

"I just want to make sure I really know you."

"You know enough. I'm a nice guy. I go for you in a big way. That's all you need to know."

"Okay," she said. "We'll never mention it again."

"That's fine," he said. He paused. One of his words had been thick. He laughed. "Another drink, I need. And you're beautiful."

"Am I?"

"Positively."

"More beautiful than your wife?"

"Make her look like a frump," he said.

"Beautiful enough to die for?"

"Say now . . ."

She became cool, remote.

"Look," he said. "You throw a question like that at me . . ."

"Yes, Larry?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking, I guess a guy could say you're that beautiful."

She leaned back in the booth, began laughing softly.

His eyes sobered. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Cut that out," he said.

"Why?"

"It gives me the willies. It's—You're like two people, Jeannine. One of them little and delicate and innocent. The other . . ."

"Yes, Larry? Tell me."

"I dunno. Mysterious, kind of. Puts ice in my blood."

"So you're afraid?"

"I'm not afraid of anything! Why should I be afraid of you?"

"Yes, why should you be?"

She turned her attention once more to the clock behind the bar.

Seven minutes.

A faint shudder, like a caress of strange pleasure, passed over her.

"Listen," he said. "I got to know about that clock."

"It's only a clock," she said.

"Not to you. It ain't to you."

"I'm waiting, Larry."

"Yeah, until when?"

"Midnight."

"What happens then? The coach turn into a pumpkin?"

Her dreamy eyes searched his face. "You're beginning to get drunk, Larry."

"So what?"

"Sure you don't want to go home?"

"Nope. I'm sticking with you. Meantime, I want to know what's with that clock."

"It's telling me something, Larry. Every tick is a whisper. Like soft, dragging footsteps, taking a last walk."

He was silent a moment. He blinked at her. His eyes cleared somewhat, came into focus.

"Last walk? Let's not talk morbid, doll."

"You asked me."

"Yeah, but this last walk business. Why should the clock remind you of that?"

"It paints a scene for me, Larry. I can see every detail. Wouldn't it be funny if the clock stopped at midnight?"

"That clock won't stop, not unless the electricity goes off."

"I know—it will keep going. On and on. One midnight is just like another to the clock."

"That's right—and what's so different about this one?"

She didn't answer him. Her eyes were on the clock.

Four minutes.

A pulse was beating in the hollow of her throat. She glanced at him. "Meet me down on the corner, will you?"

"Now why should I—"

"I don't want to be seen leaving with you. Leave, Larry. Now!"

"Well, okay," he said rather stiffly.

"I won't be long," she said. "You'll be there?"

His face lost its sudden touch of ill humor.

"Sure, but don't keep me waiting."

Larry slid out of the booth, paid the tab, and left.

The girl watched the clock.

One minute.

Light came and went in her eyes. Her teeth gleamed.

Midnight.

She slumped back in the booth, as if exhausted.

In a far off state penitentiary a man had been seated. A switch had been thrown. Impulses, like unleashed demons, had crashed through wires, relays. The man had died, for the capital crime of rape.

Larry was standing impatiently on the corner. He came forward to meet her. She stopped, waiting. At her left was the mouth of an alley.

Larry reached out to take her arm. But as he looked in her eyes, he became frozen, hand outstretched.

"Beast," she said. "You beast."

Her hand went up and tore the shoulder of her dress. Then she began screaming.

Larry grabbed her, tried to shut her up by shaking her. They were like that when the shout of the cop came toward them.

Larry stood in confusion a moment. Then he broke and ran. He heard the shouted command to stop, two sharp cracks of a gun . . . pain, a falling into a deep black pit of pain . . .

Jeannine was crying when the cop reached her. "That man . . . He . . . I was going home . . . I . . ."

The cop loomed big and stalwart over her innocence and delicacy. He looked at her misty eyes and his jaw muscles knotted.

"There, there, little lady. He'll never hurt nobody no more. Now, try not to think about it . . ."



Fortune Hunter

In Washington, D. C., Robert Weiss was off to a good start toward acquiring a fortune when he was stopped by police. Within 11 hours he had cashed 14 fraudulent checks during a shopping spree. Officers said Weiss had in his possession nearly 1,000 forged cashier checks made out for a total of \$750,000.

Amorous Assault

A jury in Bedford, England, decided that a kiss that lasted over two hours did not necessarily make a man guilty of assault. Thomas Lewis, 24, was tried on the charge after a prosecutor said he placed his arm around a girl and kissed her for 2½ hours. The jury found Lewis innocent.

"Hold it!" I levelled the 32. "Don't draw!" He didn't listen to me. He had the revolver out.

40 detectives later

by

HENRY SLESAR

I WASN'T flattered when Munro Dean walked into my office. I'd been hearing about Dean since '49, when I was still a hotel dick for the Statler chain. He'd taken his case to every private investigator east of Chicago. Half of them had turned him down. The others had strung him along for a few days of expense money, and then sent him off with a shrug and a promise to "keep the file active."

I kept him waiting outside for a couple of minutes, while I worried a hangnail on my thumb. Then I invited him in.

He walked like it was a struggle, and there wasn't enough flesh on his frame to excite a starving buzzard. The skin was molded to his face so that you had a pretty good idea of what kind of a skull his head would make. It wasn't easy to look Munro Dean in the eyes.

"Have a seat," I said, with professional briskness. "Seems to me I've heard your name before, Mr. Dean."

"Probably," he answered. "Were you ever with the police, Mr. Tyree?"

"Not exactly. But I've got a lot of friends on the force. It was something about your wife, wasn't it?"

"Yes. It happened in 1948, October. In Rahway, New Jersey. A man—killed her. A slim, dark man, with bushy black hair. I came home from work and saw him running out the back door. The police never caught him."



"I see. And you're still interested in finding this man."

He laughed abruptly, but without a change of expression. "Interested? Yes, I'm interested. I've been looking for him since it happened. You know that, Mr. Tyree. All you—people know that."

"Mm." I drew up a pad and poised a pencil over it. "Well, suppose we go into some detail. Have the police—"

"They've closed their books on the case. But I haven't, Mr. Tyree. I've never given up. I've had at least forty private detectives looking for him. None have helped. Some of them—his face clouded—have taken advantage of me."

It was time to clear things up.

"Look, Mr. Dean. Guys like me are in the business for money. Only some of us take the long view. Some of us figure that a real unhappy client is a bad advertisement. If I don't think I can help you, I'll hand you your hat."

I was talking too loud, and I knew it. But Munro Dean was like some gaunt symbol of failure, a patsy for the Fates. You either rubbed your hands gleefully and picked his pocket, or you got sore and shouted at him.

"You can help me," he said finally.

"What makes you so sure? Nobody else could."

"But you can. Because I've found the man."

I dropped the pencil. "Well. So what can I do now, Mr. Dean? Why not call in the police?"

"Because they'd pay no attention. Too much time has passed. They've lost interest."

"Nuts."

"It's true. I can't really prove this is the man. For one thing, he's changed. He's lost his hair. He's fatter. He's older. But he's the man."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because I am." His eyes, two burned-out lumps of coal, suddenly glowed. "That face is engraved, here." He tapped his forehead. "It's funny, you know that? All those experts, all those years. Nobody could find him. And just by chance, I see him at a lunch counter—"

"It happens," I said curtly. "Don't forget, Mr. Dean, your description wasn't much help. Maybe you're the only one who could have spotted this man."

"Perhaps. But now I need help, Mr. Tyree."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to act as go-between for this man and myself. I want you to arrange a little meeting."

"What for?"

"What do you suppose?"

I stood up. "Look, pal. The last time I set up a target was at Fort Dix. I'm not interested in that kind of work."

"Please. I just want to talk to this man. I want to make sure."

"It could be dangerous, you know. If he is your wife's killer, and if he knows you are—"

"That's where you can help. Arrange the meeting, but don't let him find out my name."

I took my seat again and sighed. It was an off-beat assignment, but the only one that had crossed my battered desk in two weeks. Beggars don't get many choices, and the rent on my cubicle of a LaSalle Street office was looming like the National Debt.

"Okay," I said. "Let's have the story."

The lunch counter wasn't what I'd expected. I cruised by it in a cab around eleven-thirty the next day, looking for the kind of a grease-pit you'd expect to find on the corner of a city street. But this was a new-style hash joint, with concealed lighting and Muzak and waitresses with black-chiffon blouses.

I strolled in around five of noon and slipped into a booth. According to Munro Dean, my pigeon fed himself regularly at twelve-fifteen in this modernistic eatery. That gave me a chance to get well into a meal by the time he arrived.

The food wasn't any great improvement on Joe's Place. I chewed on the leathery fringe of a fried egg, and kept my eyes on the doorway.

At twelve-fifteen, a burly gent with a pink scalp and red face sauntered in, holding a tabloid under his arm. His complexion looked like a bad case of soil erosion, and his beady eyes were shrewd and old. This was my boy.

I watched him hunt up a seat at the counter, and tried to place him in my mental rogue's gallery. Nothing clicked.

He spread his bulk on a stool, clipped out an order to the hard blonde in the black blouse, and fanned out the newspaper. All through his meal, he never took his eyes from the page. I thought of taking the direct approach, but decided that he was too suspicious a type. Instead, I waited until he was through and followed him outside.

We took a bus together, the pigeon and I. Throughout the ride I kept thinking up approaches and rejecting them just as fast. This was no easy trick, cozing up to a knowing character like this one. I had to play it by ear, until the method of operation made itself plain.

The bus swung into Michigan Boulevard, and the guy started for the doors. I didn't take any chances; he looked like he'd been tailed before. I got off one stop before he did, and followed the bus on foot until he hopped off.

When I saw his destination, the method I needed was clear. It was one of those glass-fronted record shops—not a fancy LP joint, but a dusty storehouse piled high with ancient 78's. My pigeon had hidden depths. He was a record collector, and this was one language I knew.

I waited a few minutes before entering the shop. Then I browsed around a stack of discs until I found something interesting.

"Pardon me," I said as I walked up to him. "Can you tell me the price of this?"

"Huh? Oh, you got me wrong, Mac. I'm a customer myself."

I laughed. "Sorry," I said, and started to turn away. Then I performed a double-take and oggled the record in his hand. "Hey—old Whiteman band, huh? Think Bix is on it?"

"I dunno." He looked at me curiously. "I was wonderin' the same thing."

"Had some good luck with Bix lately," I said. "Found some of his old Goldkette stuff in a store on State Street. Found an old Fletcher Henderson on Vocalion, too—"

"Yeah? No kidding?"

I had him hooked. His mouth became unhinged, giving me a lovely view of a lot of bad teeth. And there was interest on his face. "You must use radar, pal," he said. "I get nothin' but the junk."

"Just a matter of luck," I said smugly. Then I frowned, unhappily. "Trouble is, I gotta dump my collection. I'm leaving town the end of the month, and I'll be on the road a lot. Can't lug all those records with me. Think a joint like this would give me any kind of a price?"

His eyes bugged. "Hell," he said. "They'd only give you peanuts, Mac. You ought to sell to a private collector."

"Sounds great. Only who?"

A smile spread across his ugly map, and I had that numb, contented feeling you get when you know a problem is solved.

In another ten minutes, we were splitting a bottle of beer in the tavern across the street and talking labels. He was calling me Bill and I was calling him Otto. By the time we broke up, we had an appointment all set up in the Hotel Bayshore for eight-thirty that night. Only Otto was in for a different kind of serenade from the one he expected . . .

Back at the office, I put in a call to the Bayshore and spoke to Munro Dean. I told him the good news, but he cut me short, asking me to drop over. I growled about it, but remembered who was paying the bills.

I found him in shirtsleeves in Room 305, keeping company with a bottle of bourbon.

"It's all set, huh?" he said, squeezing his hands around the glass. "He's coming, right?"

"He's coming. To look at some records." I explained the details of the ruse, but Dean didn't seem interested. He kept staring into the glass, his lips white.

"It's been so long," he whispered. "So many years . . ."

"And so many dollars," I said. "This search of yours hasn't been cheap, Mr. Dean."

"No," he answered hollowly. "It's cost thousands. Hiring all those men . . ."

I headed for the door. "Well, if you need anything else—"

"I do!"

"What?"

He put his glass on the floor and went to the red-leather suitcase on the bed. He fumbled at the straps, and his hands were shaking as he snapped open the locks. But they were steady when they came out with the V-shaped parcel in brown paper. Even before he got the wraps all the way off, I knew it was a .32 automatic.

"Good idea," I said approvingly. "You'll need the protection, Mr. Dean."

"No." He came towards me. "This is for you."

"What?"

"Take it. I—I don't know anything about guns. They frighten me."

"What do you want me to do with it?"

He looked at the floor. "I want you to do it for me. I thought I could do it myself, but I can't. After all these years—I can't."

He shoved the weapon at me, but I wouldn't touch it.

"Look, Mr. Dean," I said. "You better let the cops handle our friend Otto. If you can prove he's your wife's murderer—"

"Don't lecture me!" he said hoarsely. "I'm offering you a deal. This man killed the most important thing in my life. I'll give you three thousand dollars to avenge me!"

That stopped me cold. "Three grand?"

"Yes! And there won't be any risk. Not when the story comes out. It'll be self-defense. After all, I hired you to protect me. And when this man threatens my life . . . Don't you see!"

"Yeah. I see all right. Only I can't buy it, Mr. Dean. Not even at your price."

He snatched the gun back angrily. "All right! If that's the way you want it."

"And I'd think twice about doing it yourself, Mr. Dean. The law's pretty definite about murder—no matter what the reason."

He took a wallet from the jacket draped over a chair and slowly counted out my fee.

"Here you are, Mr. Tyree. Thank you."

I opened the door. "You sure that's all?"

"Positive." I closed the door.

I got back to the office around five-thirty and typed out a report on the case, leaving out my speculations about what might happen in Room 305 at the Bayshore that night. I figured that part was none of my business.

I dropped the folder into the file and frowned at the skimpy number of reports in the cabinet. I wasn't getting rich at this business, and I began to wonder if hotel sleuthing wasn't such a bad dodge after all.

I dropped into the chair behind my desk and chewed thoughtfully on the hangnail. Behind me,

the sun was making a last splash, and the blood-red color reflected in my window started me thinking about Dean and his long hunt for the killer of his wife. I supposed that I should feel sorry for Dean. But for some reason, I was feeling sympathy for the heavy-set bald guy named Otto who would be knocking on the door of Dean's hotel room in a couple of hours. It had been a crummy way to earn my rent money, setting him up for ambush. No matter how good the cause, I felt like some kind of pimp.

Around seven o'clock, I dropped into the chop-house down the street. Nothing on the menu stirred my appetite, so I ordered a couple of coffees and sipped them in silence for an hour.

Then I went for a walk. I didn't think about my destination, until I got within viewing distance of the cheap neon sign that said HOTEL BAYSHORE, TRANSIENTS.

I set up a minor stake-out across the street, suddenly hoping that the pigeon wouldn't show.

But he did. At twenty-five past eight, the burly gent with the fondness for old jazz records came striding down the street. He headed straight for the hotel doorway.

I smoked another cigarette while I tried to make up my mind. Then I dropped the butt to the street, stomped on it and headed for the Bayshore.

I took the elevator to the third floor, strolled down the empty hallway to Room 305. It was awfully quiet behind the door. I put my ear to it, listening for sounds.

For another minute—nothing.

Then—*bam!*

Without thinking, I hit that door like a fullback. It crashed open, and somebody yelled. At the same time, a lamp spun crazily off an end table, the shade rolling at my feet, the naked bulb setting up a glare in the small room that fell revealingly on the frightened face of Munro Dean.

He was crouching against the wall, still in shirt-sleeves, with the .32 in his white-knuckled hand. He was blubbing, and his eyes were on the burly man on the carpet. Otto wasn't dead, but he was flopping like a fish, and muttering a hoarse monologue of foul words. His hand was trying to get inside his jacket, and there wasn't any doubt about what he was after.

Munro's arm straightened out again, and I yelled at him not to shoot. He wasn't listening, so I made a flying leap over the wounded man and batted the gun out of Munro's hand. That broke him up; he slipped down against the wall and covered his face with both hands. I got the gun in time to cover the man on the floor.

"Outa the way!" he shrieked, his revolver half out of his jacket. "I'll kill the son-of-a-bitch—"

"Hold it!" I leveled the .32. "Don't draw!"

He didn't listen to me. He had the revolver out. Behind me, Dean was making noises like a sick calf.

"You're not hurt bad, pal," I said to Otto. "Looks like a leg wound. Don't make things any worse."

"Get outa the way!"

Instinct told me to shoot now and avoid trouble, but I couldn't do it. The next thing I knew, Dean was on my back, clutching me like a log in a rough sea, blubbing at me to protect him. The revolver barked, and chewed out a splinter in the wall behind us. Dean grabbed for the .32 in my hand, yelling for me to fire. I tried to shake him off, but he was obsessed. In the struggle, he got spun around and Otto's next bullet caught him. I didn't mean to set Dean up that way, but I caught a look in his eyes, when he went to the floor, that was accusing.

I had no choice now. I squeezed the trigger and saw blood spurt from the burly gent's wounded hand. He moaned as the gun dropped from his hand, then he fell forward on the carpet his face contorted with pain.

I looked at Dean. The bullet had caught him in the abdomen, and there was no doubt that he was through. I went over to Otto.

"Can you talk?" I asked him.

He nodded his head.

"You know this guy?" I said. "You recognize him?"

"Yeah. Rahway, 1948 . . ."

"You killed his wife, didn't you?"

He strained to look at me. "Who the hell are you?"

"Nobody," I said. "Just a hired hand."

The burly guy chuckled, even though he was bleeding.

"What's so funny?" I said.

"Him," Otto said. "Always keepin' his hands clean. Always hirin' somebody to do the work . . ." He grimaced with pain.

"What are you talking about?"

"He hired me to do it. Hired me to kill his wife. Then he hired guys all over the country to find me, knock me off, so I'd never talk."

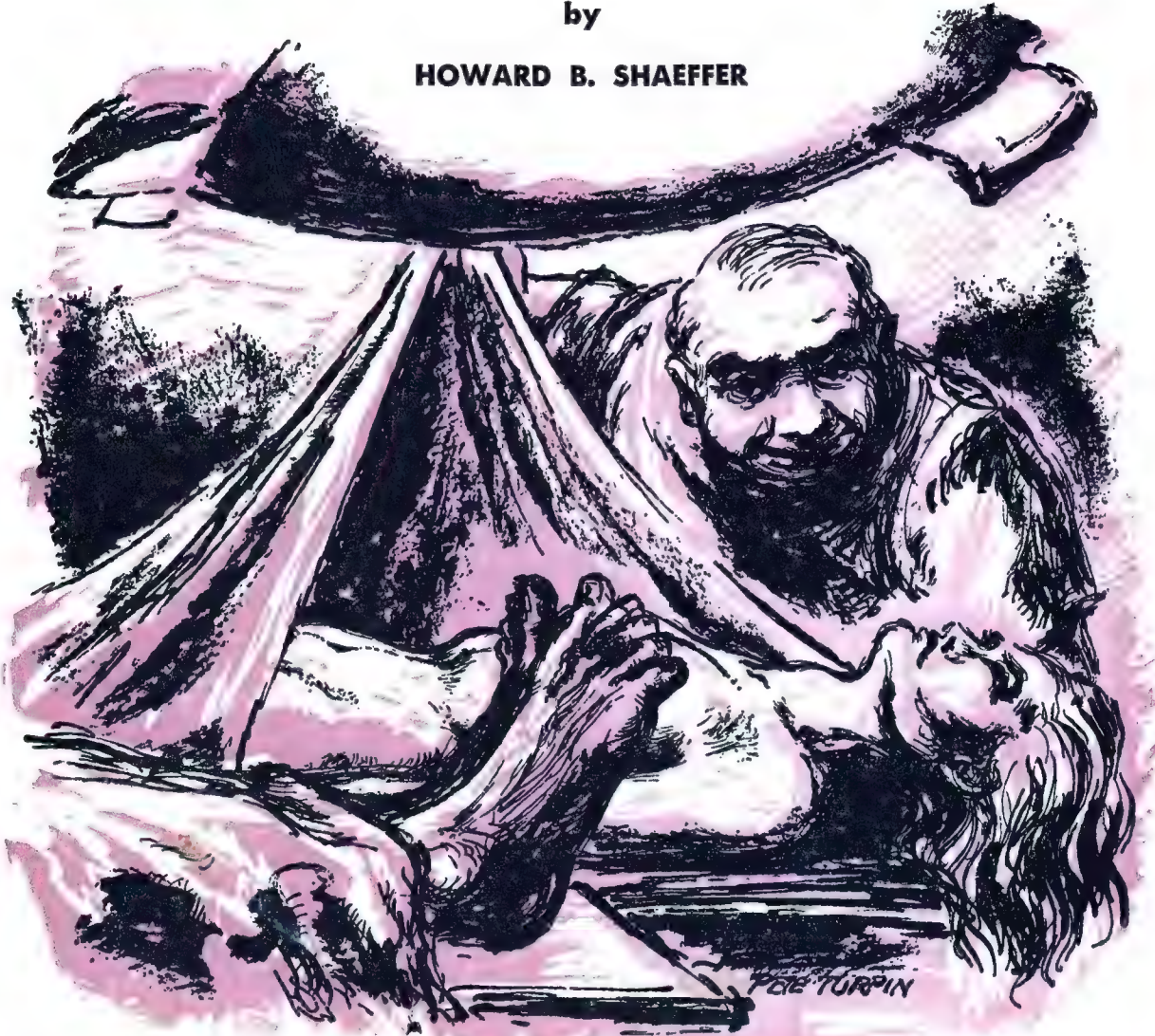
I stared down at the burly man. Finally, I looked over at Munro Dean. There was still a flicker of life in him, and he was holding the wound with both hands. He was staring at his hands watching the blood spilling between his fingers. His hands weren't so clean now.

TOWARD A GRAVE

I'm in the morgue, Helen thought in terror. Help me! Somebody help me!

by

HOWARD B. SHAEFFER



HELEN JOHNSON struggled back from the black abyss of nothingness. She had a strange awareness of someone being near. Vaguely, through the pounding in her head and the roaring in her ears, she thought she heard voices. Detached voices—soft, faraway, floating voices. She struggled to hear, not understanding the words.

Where am I, she thought. What's happened?

Memory eased its way back into her thoughts, slowly, falteringly at first. Then it flooded over her in waves. Mamie had booked her for the night. That man, she thought, the one she hadn't liked. He had insisted on her or no one. She remembered that he had become angry over something she had said, had demanded his fifty bucks back. She re-

membered the look on his face when she had laughed at him. Remembered his reaching for the heavy ornament by his bed, raising it, bringing it crashing down. Now this, she thought, puzzled.

Voices invaded her thoughts. She could identify some of the words now. Dead! Someone is dead, she thought. Had she killed him? Helen weighed this thought a moment, sifting it back and forth. No, she thought, he hit me! That's all I remember. Somebody else must be dead. Shimmering forms began to take shape before her eyes. The thought flashed through her mind that she must have been unconscious with her eyes open. She hadn't opened them, but the blackness was fast disappearing. Voices again, floating over her, around her. Sudden flash-

ing lights. The shimmering forms slowly took shape. A blurred face stared down at her. The face disappeared and Helen found herself staring fixedly at the ceiling light directly overhead. She tried to avert her eyes. Nothing happened. The face blocked her view again. Its lips moved.

"It's a shame, lieutenant. Good lookin' gal like that. So he wanted his fifty bucks back. Didn't have to kill her for it!"

Blackness sifted slowly down upon her. The voices mingled with the droning in her ears. She fought against the blackness. She couldn't understand. Some girl is dead, she thought, but that can't be. Might it be one of Mamie's girls?

Voices again. The light came back into focus.

"Well, that about wraps it up. You boys through?"

"Just one more shot, lieutenant." A twinkling flash of light. "That'll do it. She's all yours, lieutenant."

"Here. Cover her with this sheet till the boys from downtown get here."

"What a body. Bet it was worth fifty bucks a night, huh, lieutenant?"

"You can tell this gal worked indoors; no suntan anywhere."

"Real blonde, too. Wow!"

Helen's view was suddenly obstructed by something white and billowy that wafted down upon her. The thought that had been pushing at the edge of her consciousness, finally got over and into it. Helen thrust the thought away, fearfully. As the whiteness closed about her she involuntarily tried to turn her head. Nothing happened. She struggled to grasp the significance. She tried to move her hand, her fingers, anything. But nothing happened. She had no feeling. I'm—I'm paralyzed, she thought, panic rising in her. The pushing thought emerged again; her mind tried to discard it, but it stayed, stubbornly. It's me. They think I'm dead! her mind screamed. I'm alive! Somebody help me! Please! Somebody help me!

Voices again. Helen listened intently. Maybe they hadn't sent for a doctor yet. That's it! The doctor will know.

"There she is, boys. A real doll. Take a look!"

The whiteness whisked away. It must be a sheet, she thought. The light glinted down at her. She heard a long, low whistle.

"Boy, what a dish. Why, hell, if he didn't want her, I'd of been glad to take her off his hands."

"At fifty bucks a night? That stuff's way out of your class, buster."

"What'd the M.D. say, lieutenant?"

"Blow on the head. Can't see it though. Not a mark on her!"

The whiteness floated down on her again. My God, thought Helen. They really think I'm dead. Even the doctor who examined me. Of course he made a mistake. I'm not dead! Oh, dear God, dear God, let them see that I'm alive. Please!

Helen knew she was being carried. The light got dimmer. I must tell them somehow, she thought, I must! She fought to move. Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing! She was floating again, floating, the blackness closing in. She fought it. Time stood still. Gradually reason groped its way back. Someone was near. She knew! She heard street sounds. Then voices.

"Les'll be madder'n hell, bringing a stiff in this time of night. It's almost three."

"Hell! He's gettin' paid for it. Soft job. All he's gotta do is tag em' and put em' on ice."

That's me they're talking about, thought Helen. Dear God, no! No! She sobbed within. The street sounds faded.

"Tell Les to get the wagon out here on the double. I wanta get back. Damn hospital's bad enough, but the morgue really gets under my skin."

"Know what you mean, boy. Know what you mean. Les's got an easy job, but I wouldn't take it for all the tea in China."

"Les sure seems to like it. He's a queer one. Gives me the creeps sometimes."

I'm in the morgue, Helen thought in terror. Help me! Somebody help me! She heard movements, squeaking wheels. The whiteness became whiter, then dimmer. She heard echoing footsteps. Knew she was being moved again. Somebody here'll see that I'm not dead, she thought. Les! This Les! He'll see I'm alive. God! I'm going crazy. This isn't real. It's just a bad dream. I'll try to forget it and I'll wake up. She repeated this over and over to herself, comfortingly. Suddenly the whiteness lifted. A thought far back in the recesses of her mind pushed its way to the front, shouldering out all other thoughts. It's for real! It's not a dream! You'll be buried alive—*alive*—ALIVE!

Blackness again. Then a light shining in her eyes. A new face, soft, blubbery, injected itself between her and the light.

"You boys brought me a real doll this time, didn't you? My, what pretty yellow hair—and such a pretty face. If her eyes were closed, you'd think she was sleeping, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, yeah," said the loud voice of one of the hospital attendants. "Sign this so we can get out of here, will yuh?"

The grinning face disappeared. A hand blocked the light from Helen's face. Darkness! Then the bright light again.

"Hmm," purred the soft voice. "Eyes don't want to stay closed, do they, little one?"

"Come on, will yuh?" The hospital attendant's voice again. "You can do that later."

Footsteps faded. Helen's eyes were riveted on the light overhead. Her mind refused to accept the reality of all this. Don't leave me here alone, she thought. Please don't leave me. Somebody's got to know I'm alive! The blackness pressed against her, left her. Footsteps echoed down the corridor, closer,

closer. A door clicked shut. A key turned in a lock. Les's middle-aged, fleshy face appeared above her. Her eyes were glued to his large nose. Les leered at her, and her flesh began to crawl.

"Tomorrow they'll cut you open to see what made you tick. Or rather," he corrected himself, "to see what made you stop ticking." He giggled. "Then you won't be so pretty, will you, my charming little miss!"

Cut me open? Helen thought: An autopsy! That's what he must mean. But I'm not dead. That'll kill me for sure . . .

She blacked out momentarily. Got to let him know. Got to! She struggled within her prison. All that had been recently happening welled up inside her. I must—I must! She strained. Every fiber fought against the bonds that imprisoned her. Then, ever so slowly, Helen felt the little finger of her left hand begin to rise. It took an eternity to raise it half an inch, then let it drop. Raise it half an inch, let it drop. Les had stopped talking. Helen could hear the click of her fingernail against the metallic table on which she lay. It drummed loudly in her ears. Relief flooded over her. Now Les would know she was alive. . . .

She saw Les grin broadly, stupidly. Had he heard the sound? Had he? Large beads of perspiration gleamed on his forehead. His expression cunning, mad.

"Your kind don't die easy," Les said. "I know

what you were. We get lots like you." He smiled lewdly. "Fifty bucks a night, huh! Pretty hot stuff, weren't you? Huh? Huh?"

Helen knew Les wanted an answer. The man was insane. He knew she was alive and yet he didn't go for help. Go away! Her thoughts were screaming. Get me out of here!

"Tonight," Les said, "you're working for free, baby. For free."

Helen saw him slowly begin to unbutton his jacket, draw nearer, nearer. This can't be happening, she thought over and over. Les's bare chest shadowed her. His face, his slobbering mouth, covered hers. Her mind cried out: No! No!

Les was standing beside her now, dressed again. His gleeful babbling had stopped. And his sudden silence was fear. And she saw the fear of punishment for what he had done in his wet brown eyes, as well as in his silence. But her mind was too spent to cry out. What more could be done to her? Nothing. Nothing . . .

Les's face suddenly loomed large. Larger and larger. The ceiling reeled as he lifted her in his arms. There was the motion of walking, which suddenly stopped. The empty expanse of the ceiling; she could see nothing else.

Then, the smooth flowing whiteness of a sheet engulfed her. No! NO! Her mind was screaming in agony now as Les slid her into her own, private, refrigerated compartment.



Souvenir

In Garfield, N. J., Martin Resnick, 19, pleaded guilty in city court of petty larceny. He admitted that he had stolen the magistrate's gavel when he appeared in court a month earlier on a minor charge.

"Woman" In Red

A bandit dressed in feminine clothes recently robbed Boston's Lying-In Hospital of \$40,000. Witnesses told police the gunman had a printed kerchief tied over his head and wore a woman's red knee-length coat.

Self Trappers

A suspect accused of snatching a dollar from the hand of a man waiting for a bus in Omaha, Neb., denied his guilt in court. "That wasn't this week," he shouted, "I did that over a year ago." He was given a 90 day sentence for vagrancy.

And in Rhinelander, Wis., a boy accused of attempting to steal a tape recording machine being demonstrated in a department store, protested his innocence. But officers turned on the recorder and heard the boy's voice saying, "I guess I'll steal this machine."



The Charles Turner Case

I said to the blonde, "Just when were you attacked, Miss Haliburton, and what was the man's name?"

by
RICHARD DEMING

I WON'T SAY I had completely forgotten the Charles Turner case when I was reminded of it by something George Novy told me. Novy's information concerned the strip act a woman who lived in the apartment house across the areaway from his put on for his benefit each night. No district attorney is likely to forget the case which started him up the political ladder. But that case was five years in the past, and I doubt that I'd thought of it in three.

"You better be careful," I advised Novy with a smile. "I tried a case once where the defendant started out by peeping in a neighbor woman's window. He got twenty-five years to life."

George Novy looked at me in astonishment. He was just out of law school and brand new to the district attorney's office. "Twenty-five to life just for peeping?" he asked.

"I said he started by peeping. The peeping over-excited him, and he ended up with rape."

My newest assistant grinned. "This wouldn't be rape. This gal knows I'm watching, and deliberately puts on a show. I think I'll accept the invitation one of these nights."

"Charlie Turner claimed his peep-show actress knew he was watching too. He still got twenty-five to life."

"Charlie Turner?" Novy said. "I remember that case. I was a freshman in law school then. You did handle that prosecution, didn't you?"

"It was the case that made me," I said. "If it wasn't for Charlie Turner, I'd still probably be an assistant D.A. Frank Garby would probably be

district attorney instead of me, and I certainly wouldn't be running for the senate."

"Aren't you being a little modest, chief?" Novy asked.

I shook my head. "Public life is just as speculative a profession as acting. You need the one big break in both. In acting, it may be getting called to take over for a sick star on the night a movie talent scout is in the audience. For a public prosecutor with political ambitions, the big break is almost always a highly-publicized criminal case. Mine was Charles Turner."

George Novy cocked a dubious eyebrow.

"Just consider," I said. "Before the Turner case I was just an unknown assistant district attorney like you, the junior of eight in Saint Francis County. Nine hundred and ninety-nine voters out of a thousand had never heard of me. By the time the case was over, there wasn't a person in the state who didn't know who I was. Which made it almost mandatory for the party to by-pass the other seven assistants plus Frank Garby, who even then was first assistant D.A., when it came time to pick a new district attorney candidate because old Harry Doud wanted to retire."

"You may have something there," Novy said reflectively. "Even after five years, you see, I remembered you tried that case. And I've only actually known you three months. Next time a juicy rape case comes up, how about throwing it my way? I've got political ambitions too."

"You keep peeping in that woman's window, and you may end up the defendant in a rape case instead of the prosecutor."

"It would almost be worth it," Novy said with a faraway look in his eyes. "She's not as young as she could be, but what a body she's got! You ought to drop over some evening and see the show."

He went off into a detailed anatomical description of his exhibitionistic neighbor, but I wasn't listening. My thoughts had drifted back five years to the case which gave me my big break.

It wasn't just political ambition which made me build a relatively minor rape case into a sensational trial. If it had been, District Attorney Harry Doud would have thrown on the brakes. I was sincerely crusading for the protection of all womanhood against morals offenders, and the crusade just happened to catch public interest.

It caught public interest because the time was ripe. A number of brutal and unsolved rapes by a teen-age gang which was terrorizing the east end of town had made the whole city rape conscious. The police and the D.A.'s office were fretting under increasing editorial demands that "something be done." So both officialdom and the general public were ready and eager for somebody like Charles Turner to come along and be made an example of.

My choice as prosecutor was pure luck. I happened to be the only assistant in the office when the call about Turner's arrest came in. Harry Doud sent me over to make the preliminary investigation merely because I was available, later kept me on the case, I think, because my crusading fire caught him in the same way it eventually caught the public. If any of the other assistants had been around, Saint Francis would probably have a different district attorney today.

When the phone rang, I picked it up and said, "District attorney's office. Wilde speaking."

"Lieutenant Gordon, Johnnie," said a husky voice. "We got a rape case down here for you."

"Oh?" I asked. "One of that teen-age gang, I hope."

"Naw," the lieutenant said. "This guy's an adult. Forced his way into a neighbor woman's bedroom."

"Okay," I told him. "Somebody'll be over."

When I went into the boss's office to tell him, Harry Doud asked the same question I had. "One of that teen-age gang, finally?"

I shook my head. "An adult who jumped one of his neighbors in her own home."

The boss promptly lost interest. "Well, run over to the headquarters and see what they've got," he said. "If you run into the chief, ask him when the hell he's going to catch one of those teen-agers."

At headquarters I found Lieutenant Gordon in his office with two women. One, who I assumed must be the rape victim, was a striking blonde of about nineteen with delicate, sensitive features and a build which was almost an open invitation to criminal assault. The other was about forty, an attractive, full-bosomed woman who was a mature replica of the younger. Even before introductions, it was obvious they were mother and daughter.

"This is Assistant District Attorney John Wilde," the lieutenant told the two women. He introduced the older woman as Mrs. Haliburton, and the young blonde as her daughter Eleanor, then added, "They're the victim and the witness in the case I phoned you about."

I said to the blonde, "Just when were you attacked, Miss Haliburton, and what was the man's name?"

Gordon said, "You've got your signals crossed, Johnnie. Mrs. Haliburton was the victim."

I looked at the older woman in surprise, and she blushed.

Gordon said, "The culprit's a guy named Charles Turner."

My surprise turned to astonishment. "Not Congressman Charles Turner?"

Now Lieutenant Gordon looked surprised. "No, of course not. Turner's in Washington, and anyway this guy isn't more than twenty-five." A thoughtful expression grew on his face. "The name didn't register until you mentioned it. I didn't ask him

whether or not he's related to the congressman."

Mrs. Haliburton said in a quiet voice. "He's Congressman Turner's son."

No one said anything for a few moments. The woman's statement had suddenly changed a routine rape investigation into a delicate political problem. Theoretically everyone is equal under the law, but in practice you handle people backed by political influence with a great deal more care than you handle the average citizen. Since Congressman Turner was of the opposition party, I knew that even more care than usual would be necessary in this case, for the slightest misstep in investigation or prosecution could bring the charge that we were framing his son in order to embarrass the congressman politically.

Presently I said, "I didn't know Turner had a son."

"He's been away at school," Mrs. Haliburton said, pretty calmly I thought, for a woman who'd recently been attacked. "He's just graduated in June, and has only lived here in town a few weeks."

I said, "It sounds as though you know him pretty well."

"Only as a neighbor. He lives in the same apartment building we do, directly across the court from us. I have some tulips planted in the courtyard, and a couple of times he's wandered out while I was tending them. We had a little neighborly conversation, little more than an exchange of introductions and comments on the weather. But I considered him a bare acquaintance."

"Tell me what happened today," I said.

The woman glanced at her daughter and flushed slightly, then said in a resolute voice, "Mr. Turner rang my hall bell at about eleven-thirty this morning. I had just stepped from a bath, so I answered the door in my robe. He said, 'Hi. May I come in?' I was a little surprised, because he'd never called before, but I assumed he had some legitimate reason for wanting to talk to me. It never even occurred to me it mightn't be safe to let him in."

"So you invited him in? He didn't have to force his way?"

"Oh no. I told him to wait in the front room while I dressed. I went into the bedroom and had just slipped off my robe when . . ." She paused and fixed her eyes on the floor. With an effort she went on, "I was stark naked when he suddenly came into the bedroom. He had taken off all his clothes in the front room and was naked too. He grabbed me before I could even let out a gasp of surprise."

"Had you closed the bedroom door?" I asked.

She blushed and glanced at her daughter again. "Not completely," she said in a reluctant tone. "I left it ajar, but it was pushed to enough so that I couldn't be seen from the front room. I left it ajar in case he tired of waiting and decided to tell me his business while I dressed. We could have carried

on conversation easily enough, as the bedroom gives right off the front room."

"I see," I said. "So he pushed open the door and grabbed you. Did you fight him?"

"I tried. But he's an awfully powerful young man. Wait till you see him. Besides, I was nearly out of my wits from fright."

"Did you scream?"

She shook her head. "He held his hand over my mouth every time I tried." She paused, looked at her daughter and said in a low, distressed voice, "Now that it's over, I can think of all sorts of things I might have done. Bitten his palm, for example, or rammed my knee into his groin. But I was so paralyzed by fear, I just couldn't think. I finally just gave up."

I said, "Now please don't let my next question upset you, but it's one I have to have answered. It's of extreme importance, because it makes all the difference between the charge of attempted rape and actual rape. Did he succeed in his attack?"

"Yes," she said nearly inaudibly. "Eleanor came in before he could . . ."

When her voice trailed off, I looked at the blonde daughter. "You actually witnessed the act?" I asked.

She nodded with a mixture of distaste and anger. "It was just luck that I came home. Ordinarily I lunch downtown. But I had a headache and the boss let me take off a little early for lunch so I could run home for some headache tablets I had there. I'm a stenographer for Ward and Thomas."

"I see. So you came home unexpectedly. Just what did you see?"

"The first thing I saw was a man's clothes thrown all over the sofa. Then I saw the bedroom door standing wide open and heard Mother groan. I rushed into the bedroom, saw what was happening, and started to beat on the man's back with my fists. He rolled off the bed, and Mother began to scream hysterically. I started to scratch the man's face, but he gave me a push that knocked me down. Then he ran into the front room. I guess he must have dressed and rushed out, but I didn't go to see what he was doing. I was too busy trying to comfort Mother, who was sobbing and trying to tell me what had happened, both at the same time. Mr. Turner was gone when I finally looked in the front room. Then I phoned the police."

I turned back to Mrs. Haliburton. "You understand that there's no way to keep your identity a secret when we prosecute this man. The unfortunate thing about a rape case is that the victim has to suffer unwelcome publicity along with the culprit. Unless she's a minor, which you're not."

The woman looked upset. She glanced at the blonde Eleanor, who said, "Are you suggesting that we don't press charges against this beast just to avoid publicity?"

"No," I told her. "Forcible rape is a felony, and

you don't have that choice, once you've reported the crime. I'm merely explaining what you're in for. We'll try to keep the unpleasantness to a minimum, but your friends and acquaintances are all going to read about the rape in the newspapers. And no doubt the tabloids will carry your picture also."

I looked at the mother again. "Incidentally, does your husband know what happened yet?"

"I'm a widow," she said.

"We have no close relatives," Eleanor said. "We'll stand the publicity. We want this animal jailed so he can't harm other women."

"Fine," I said. "With the co-operation of both of you, we ought to be able to get him jailed fast. You can go home now. Someone from the district attorney's office will get in touch with you as soon as a prosecutor is assigned to the case and the prosecution strategy is worked out. I'm just making the preliminary investigation, you understand, and probably won't try the case."

"Will there necessarily be a trial?" Mrs. Haliburton asked. "If he agrees to plead guilty, won't he just be sentenced?"

"He can't plead guilty to rape in this state," I told her. "The maximum sentence is death, and the law requires a mandatory not-guilty plea for capital crimes. There has to be a trial whether Turner wants one or not."

I turned to Lieutenant Gordon. "Let's take a look at the prisoner now."

The lieutenant had Charles Turner brought to the interrogation room, and we questioned him there. He was a powerfully-built man of about twenty-five with a face which would have been handsome if it hadn't worn such a sullen expression. I disliked him the instant I saw him, not just because he was a rapist, but because he looked like the wise-guy type.

But because he was the son of a congressman, I adopted a pleasant tone. "You seem to be in a little jam, Turner."

"I want a lawyer before I say a word," he said belligerently. "I've a right to legal advice."

"You've a right to legal advice when you're accused of a crime," I said. "So far you're only booked for investigation. We first have to establish that a crime's been committed. This is a preliminary investigation, not an official interrogation. There's no stenographer present, and you won't be asked to sign a statement. I just want to know what happened."

He looked at me sullenly. "You can't establish that any crime was committed. I didn't rape that woman."

"No? What's your story?"

"She asked for it. I'll admit the daughter walked in and saw it all. But it wasn't rape. It was that woman's doing as much as mine. More even."

When I merely waited for him to go on, he said indignantly, "She'd been walking around in the

nude over there in her apartment for days, trying to tease me into coming over. What the hell did she expect?"

"You'd been spying on her from your own apartment?"

"Spying? Listen, it didn't take any spying. Their front windows are right across from mine, see, with a forty-foot-wide courtyard in between. I can see into their apartment and they can see into mine, when the shades are up. She knew I was watching her. She was putting on an act."

"What kind of act?"

He ran fingers through his hair. "A tease act. I don't have a job yet, see. I just graduated from college in June, and I've been taking a little vacation before settling down to work. I've been going out a lot nights and sleeping late. I get up about eleven, and every day I glance across the way. And every day, timing it to about the time she figures I get up, Mrs. Haliburton prances into her front room bare naked and starts calisthenics. Only she's not interested in the exercise. She just wants to give me an eyefull."

I asked, "How do you know?"

"Because of the way she does it. Never fully looking my way, but standing so she can see me from the corner of her eye. You think I can't tell when a woman is deliberately putting on a show?"

"You're an expert?" I asked. "You've had lots of experience watching naked women through windows?"

He turned red. "No I haven't had lots of experience. But you can tell when a woman knows somebody is watching her. And Mrs. Haliburton knew I was watching her."

"How do you tell?" I asked. "What's your basis of comparison?"

"The young daughter's my basis of comparison!" he suddenly bawled at me. "She doesn't pose like a strip artist when she's bare. She just pops out of the bedroom and into the bathroom as fast as she can."

Then he looked dismayed at his own admission. "Listen," he said. "Don't get the wrong idea. I wasn't playing Peeping Tom. I just happened to be looking that way once when I saw the daughter. It was pure accident, not like the old lady's peep show. I'll admit I watch that on purpose, but she knows I'm watching."

"I'll bet," I said. "So that's why you went over this morning, is it? You thought you'd be welcome."

"I was welcome. She didn't yell rape until the daughter caught us. She can't say she did."

"But she does say she did," I told him pleasantly. "She says it was rape. You claim it was just seduction?"

"Well, she invited me in."

"She admits that," I said. "Why shouldn't she have? She knew you were a fellow tenant. It was a normal action. You figure that inviting you in was

an invitation to seduction?"

"The way she said it, yes." In a falsetto voice he mimicked, "Why, hello. Come in. You'll have to wait until I get something on. I'm completely bare under this robe."

"She said it like that, or you imagined it like that? Those were her exact words and tone?"

"Well, maybe not exact. But they boiled down to that."

I said, "Wasn't it your inflamed imagination that boiled them down to that? Didn't she actually just invite you in, tell you to wait while she dressed, and go into the bedroom?"

"No, it wasn't my inflamed imagination!" he yelled. "I know an invitation when I hear it. Sure she told me to wait while she dressed, but what she meant was wait until she shed her robe and then come get her."

"You read minds, do you?" I asked.

"I don't have to read minds to tell a woman on the make!" he shouted. "Listen, she planted me on the sofa, then went in the bedroom and left the door open a good foot. I couldn't see through that opening, because she was beyond the door, but it left a crack where the door was hinged. From the sofa I could see right through it. Why'd she put me on the sofa and then fix the door like that, if she didn't want to give me a peep show?"

"I couldn't say," I told him. "Did you get a peep show?"

"Sure I did. She pulled off her robe and posed around in front of the mirror, pretending to fix her hair. And all the time she knew I was watching."

"So you took this as the final invitation?"

"Wouldn't you?" he demanded.

"I've never been in a similar situation. So you accepted this supposed invitation by stripping yourself and entering the bedroom, did you?"

"Listen, I knew what she wanted."

"Sure you did. She accepted you eagerly, I suppose?"

A look of doubt crossed his face. "Oh, she looked surprised and tried to act indignant. But that was just part of the game. She didn't struggle enough even to make it convincing."

"She *did* struggle some then?"

"Listen," he said. "Every woman struggles a little. It's to convince herself she's not a tramp. I'm telling you the truth. Mrs. Haliburton lured me over there by putting on her naked acts; she deliberately put on another to get me in the bedroom, and she gave in because she wanted to. She yelled rape just to save face in front of her daughter. If the daughter hadn't walked in, I wouldn't be down here."

I said to Lieutenant Gordon. "I think I have enough. Let him phone a lawyer, then send him back to his cell."

When I got back to the office and went in to

report to the old man, I was already beginning to feel the fire of a crusade building in me to the point of eruption.

I said to Harry Doud, "If Charles Turner Senior's political influence gets his son out of this, I'm getting out of the legal profession. Any rapist is a low enough animal, but this one takes the prize. To save his own hide, he's willing to brand his accuser a tramp. This Mrs. Haliburton is as respectable-looking a woman as you'd find anywhere. He can't possibly win with his cockeyed defense, but it'll be printed in the newspapers if he springs it. And plenty of readers who don't know the full courtroom testimony will believe it."

"No defense attorney with any brains will let him use the story," Doud said. "The minute he admits she struggled, he's lost."

"He'll cut that part after a little legal advice," I said impatiently. "He *has* to use the story. The daughter caught them right in the act, so he can't claim less than seduction. His only hope is to establish in the jury's mind that she was willing."

Doud scratched an ear. "You're probably right," he said finally. "I don't suppose Turner has any previous record, does he?"

"Not here. Lieutenant Gordon's checking with his college town. I'd like to see this fellow made an example of. A good stiff sentence for a person with Turner's influence would be better protection for other women than all the police patrols you could set up. It would prove we don't compromise with rapists, no matter who they are. These teen-age kids might think twice before pulling another attack if they knew they were flirting with the electric chair."

"You're pretty worked up about this, aren't you?" the district attorney asked.

"You're damned right I am. In my book a rapist is one step below a dope peddler."

He studied me estimatingly for a long time, finally asked, "Want to handle the prosecution?"

I was a little taken aback. Already I'd begun to visualize it as a big case, perhaps one big enough to deserve the personal attention of the D.A. himself. It hadn't occurred to me that I might get it.

"Why, sure," I said. "If you want me to."

"The experience will do you good," he said. "And maybe your enthusiasm will do this office some good."

He cautioned me about the political aspects of the case, which I'd already thought of, told me to call on him for all the help I needed, and wished me luck.

The next morning Lieutenant Gordon phoned that his check with Turner's college town had hit pay dirt. Two years previously Charles Turner had been convicted of attempted rape on a girl he'd picked up in a bar. His father's influence had gotten him off with a fine and suspended sentence, but the incident could possibly cost him his life

now. Once I managed to implant in the jury's mind that Mrs. Haliburton wasn't the first woman Turner had tried his cave-man technique on, it wasn't likely to accept Turner's version of events as against that given by the two women witnesses. My case against Turner looked airtight.

The rest of the case is history. You'll recall from news stories that Charles Turner's father engaged the eminent criminal lawyer, Gerald Winters, to defend his son. And that the defense was approximately what I'd guessed it would be, except that Gerald Winters dropped all reference to the nude calisthenics act Turner had described to me. Apparently the defense attorney realized this was more likely to make the defendant look like a peeping Tom than convince the jury the plaintiff was trying to tantalize him into action. Winters blocked my efforts to bring it in by having Turner blandly pretend he didn't know what I was talking about when I asked him under oath if he'd ever seen Mrs. Haliburton nude prior to the day in question.

Instead, Gerald Winters attempted to establish that Mrs. Haliburton had been seductively invitational on the several occasions she and the defendant had met in the courtyard. Turner testified that she had; Mrs. Haliburton testified that she hadn't. So it was left to the jury to decide which was lying.

The prosecution and defense versions of what happened after Turner entered the bedroom differed more radically than their versions of what happened before he entered. The defense claimed there had been no resistance of any sort; I put Mrs. Haliburton on the stand and had her tell that she had resisted with every force at her command, but was finally forced to submit.

It was a rather telling blow for the prosecution when we got across to the jury that Charles Turner weighed two hundred and fifteen pounds, Mrs. Haliburton one hundred and twenty.

The prominence of the defendant made it a page-one case, but we carefully avoided giving the defense any ammunition with which to claim Turner was being railroaded in order to embarrass his father politically. We even went so far as not to try to get a signed statement from Turner, so that the defense couldn't claim undue duress. We based our case entirely on the testimony of Mrs. Haliburton and her daughter.

Because I made a crusade of the case, and the newspapers enthusiastically backed the crusade, I got considerable personal publicity. As a young and unknown prosecutor facing one of the greatest criminal lawyers in the country, I was likened to David fighting Goliath. Over and over the papers eulogized my fiery spirit and oratorical eloquence.

I would like to say that my eloquence won the case for the prosecution. But I have to admit that if Charles Turner had been charged with any

crime other than rape, and I'm including murder, the jury might have given him the benefit of the doubt. For there *was* the reasonable doubt that the plaintiff had cried rape merely to save her daughter's opinion of her. The daughter's testimony established beyond question that at least seduction had taken place, and furthermore the defense admitted it. But establishing forcible rape hinged solely on the word of the victim. And the jury was as obligated to consider Turner's version of events as it was to consider Mrs. Haliburton's.

The psychology in rape cases differs from that in all other crimes, however. The constitutional guarantee that the accused is innocent until proved guilty is exactly reversed. No one admits it, but the jury, the press, the general public, and often even the court, automatically regards an accused rapist as guilty until proved innocent. In effect he is told: let the burden of proof of your innocence rest on you.

In all other cases, of course, the burden of proof rests on the prosecution.

Probably the explanation is the general acceptance that no woman would undergo the public shame of admitting she'd been raped unless she had. She might lie about being cheated or robbed, but the average person can't conceive of her lying about being raped. So despite the constitutional guarantee, in rape cases the burden of proof lies on the accused.

Charles Turner failed to prove his innocence. He was found guilty and sentenced to twenty-five years to life.

I never had any qualms of conscience about the verdict whenever I thought of it later. I was convinced Turner was guilty and got what he deserved. My sole emotion on the gradually decreasing occasions I thought of young Turner in subsequent years was gratification that I had been lucky enough to draw the case. For it had made me politically. The turning point of my career.

George Novy's voice penetrated my thoughts. Not noticing my preoccupation, he was still talking about his female neighbor.

"She's probably all of forty-five," he said. "But she still has the body of a teen-ager. She lives alone too."

"No husband?" I asked idly.

"She's a widow. I talked to the guy who lives below her, and he says she has a daughter, but the daughter's married and lives with her husband."

A vague suspicion tugged at my mind, one involving an impossible coincidence.

"You know this woman's name?" I asked.

"Sure. I got that from her downstairs neighbor, too. It's Mrs. Haliburton."

I don't think I changed expression, but internally I went through a series of emotional spasms. It is a terrible shock to suddenly have thrust upon you

the knowledge that you've condemned an innocent man to half a lifetime in prison.

Instantly I thought of a pardon, and how I might go about obtaining the proof necessary to request one. After remaining quiet for five years, it seemed unlikely that merely asking the woman to undo her wrong by confessing she had invited seduction from Turner would get me anywhere.

Then I realized I had the means to force a confession right at hand. I could induce George Novy to accept the woman's overt invitation, arrange for witnesses and catch her red-handed in a situation exactly like the one which had sent Charles Turner to prison.

Then a cautioning thought intruded. I couldn't free Turner from prison without exposing my own grievous error. Ordinarily such a thing wouldn't have any serious repercussions, probably would only merit bare mention in the news. But at the present moment it would be political suicide.

For, you see, my opponent in the coming senatorial race was Congressman Charles Turner Senior. And the opposition would make political capital of the fact that, five years previously, I had railroaded his son into prison. At the very least Congressman Turner would draw widespread sympathy.

Sympathy means votes. There was no doubt in my mind that obtaining a pardon for Charles Turner would mean handing the senate seat to my opponent.

It was a problem I would have to postpone until I could give it serious thought, I decided.

George Novy said, "Incidentally, what was the name of that woman in the Turner case?"

The question killed all opportunity to postpone my decision. I had to decide what to do right now. I made my decision.

"That was five years ago," I said. "I don't recall her name."



Lost Loot

Milton Laughrey, 32, told police in Pittsburgh, Pa., that his wallet containing \$150 had been stolen by a pickpocket. While being questioned about the theft, Laughrey let slip that he had stolen the money from his employer a few hours before he was robbed.

Short Sentence

Robert E. Wells, 28, recently received what is believed to be the shortest sentence ever handed down in a federal court. Wells, a discharged Marine, was charged in Oklahoma City with illegally wearing a Marine uniform. U. S. District Judge Ross Rizley, observing that Wells had been in custody for 28 days while the charge was being processed, sentenced Wells to 10 minutes in jail.

Special Delivery

In Columbia, S. C., a convict in the state prison had himself shipped to freedom. Officials said Harry Koch, 24, apparently had an accomplice conceal him in a carton that was part of a shipment from the prison's book bindery. The escape was discovered when the shipment reached the state schoolbook commission one box short. According to authorities, Koch's prison record includes the notation: "Repeated outrageous conduct."

Moon Madness

Charged with the murder of her 66 year old husband, Albert, in Bristol, England, Mrs. Freda Rumbold, 44, testified at her trial that the victim "went crazy every time there was a full moon." Mrs. Rumbold said her husband "was always violent at full moon times, so I had to protect myself."



NEW GIRL

She wanted him to follow her. He did. It went like clockwork . . .

by

DE FORBES

SYLVIA walked the street. Haggerty, the cop, and Mr. Tambollio of the corner grocery watched her coming, turned to watch her go. Three of the Purple Pythons, on their way to a gang meeting, offered a suggestive remark; laughed as she passed them by, head high. Sylvia was an oddity in the neighborhood. The untouchable. The word had gotten around. "She's new," they said. "She's young," they said. "So maybe she's a virgin. There are such things," they said. They watched and waited . . . an easy thing to do.

Her full-skirted green dress accentuated her young pointed breasts, clung to her slender waist,

swung in rhythm with her hips. Her high-heeled sandals, striking the dirty pavement, punctuated the evening sounds. Her long, gold-brown hair curled up to lie loosely on her shoulders. Haggerty sighed, shook his head. She was an open invitation—and someday somebody would take her up on it.

She passed the brick warehouse, wearing its chalked obscenities, and turned the corner. The neighborhood lost sight of her there, went on with its business. Love, hate, live, die. Routine matters.

Sylvia knew when he began to follow her. She hadn't actually seen him, not this time, but she knew he was there and that he was coming after her.

She paused, as she always did, in front of the windows of Solly Klein's Pawn Shop, looking out of habit for the watch. It was still there. Little bits of fading sunlight struck its beauty, reflected back in twinkling reds, whites, greens. It lay in eye-catching splendor in its black velvet bed. The most beautiful watch in the world, she thought, encrusted with rubies, diamonds, emeralds. He was still behind her.

She turned quickly, hair swinging free, skirt swirling, went on. The sky was darkening now, getting ready for the night. She stopped, studied a display of second-hand furniture through dingy panes. She couldn't hear him, but something moved just briefly behind her in the shadows. Sylvia smiled a tight little smile. She didn't know how to be afraid.

She went on and as the darkness obscured the streets, they grew deserted. He was closer, she thought, and she clutched her plastic shoulder bag with both hands. Soon, somewhere in the vacantness of the concrete while the buildings listened, he would show himself. She slowed down her pace, expected him.

A man turned the corner from the opposite direction, came toward her. His legs wobbled and he clung to the buildings for support. Sylvia stepped daintily around him, felt his bleary eyes slide down her body.

"Where are you hurrying to, baby?" The words were thick, wheedling. She was almost by him and he stumbled forward, caught her arm. "I said—where are you going, baby?"

She pulled her arm away, turned the anger of her blue eyes on him.

"Take your hands off me," she said. Her voice was steady.

The drunk leaned forward, barring her way. He smelled of dirt and urine and cheap wine. His trousers were damp down the front.

She reached into her bag when the voice came up behind her, young, loud, full of fury.

"Let her alone, you old bastard."

He was there now, in the open, and he swung a young hard arm. The old man swayed, a look of surprise on his gray face, fell. She watched him as he lay twitching. Then she looked up.

It was the one she had expected.

He was tall, slender, with sloping shoulders and a narrow waist. He had a shock of black hair, combed into oily waves and that grew like a dark lawn before each ear. The skin on his face was stretched tight over sharp cheekbones, a long nose. His eyes were black slits. His wide thin mouth was smiling, but his eyes were wary. All the eyes she had ever looked into had been wary.

"You need somebody to walk with you," he said and took her arm. She moved away with him. His leather jacket brushed against her. She waited for him to speak.

"I'm Patsy," he said. "You're Sylvia, aren't you?" She kept her eyes on the pavement.

"I spotted you," he said. "You're new in the neighborhood. I've seen you come by lately. Where do you go—every night?"

She shrugged. "Away. Walking. Sometimes to the park."

He released his hold a little, satisfied with the tone of her voice. "You got a guy?"

She looked up at him then. His lips were slightly parted, like a little boy waiting for a treat. She gave it to him.

"No," she said.

The street lights had come on, but all around them was the night. He pulled her closer.

"You have now," he said and with an expert movement swung her around.

He kissed her, breathing hard. His lips were rough. She was quiet in his embrace, testing her emotions. Then she moved. She brought her knee up sharply, accurately from long practice. As he reeled away from her against the building, she went for her bag.

"You God damn little bitch," he said, and crouched, moved to spring.

She brought her hand forward where he could see it. The scissors sparkled dully, their blades open in her clenched fist.

"They'll pick the eyes right out of you," she said coldly. "Nobody takes me over, just like that."

He hesitated a moment, then moved toward her. She stood her ground, readied her weapon. He stopped.

She thought a minute, then began to speak, choosing her words carefully. "I've been waiting," she said, "for the right guy. But it isn't going to be just any big stud that I put in with." She ran one hand down the curve of her body. "I've got something to offer. Something special."

He started to say something, to move to her. She brandished the scissors.

"Patsy," she said. "I've heard of you. You're the big wheel of the Robber Barons. I've heard of you."

A puzzled expression crossed his face. "I'm the bossman," he said.

"Yeah. Big rep you got. Anything for a ride and Patsy's the conductor. That's what I heard."

His confidence was coming back. White teeth gleamed in the dark oblong of his face.

"You've got the word," he said. "It isn't just any skirt that gets this boy. I take only the best."

She nodded. "I'm the best. I'm something special, I am. Choice merchandise, wrapped up in a pretty package. Just waiting for a buyer."

His tongue came out. He licked his lips. "I'll buy," he said. "How much?"

She laughed, a gay tinkling laugh.

"I come high," she said. "I come dear."

He moved a step closer. This time she did not stop him.

"Anything," he said and his voice was hot. "I made up my mind when I saw you, when I heard you weren't shelling out. Anything."

"You're the one who made the offer," she said, opened her bag with her other hand, dropped the scissors in.

He swarmed over her.

She looked up at him and the night became blacker. "Anything?" She asked softly.

"Anything," he said and they moved at the same time. Their mouths met, moved against each other like living things.

His hands roamed her body. He whispered against her hair. "Where? Where?"

She melted into him. "I don't care."

He tried to control himself. "The park? It isn't far."

She shook her head. "Cops," she said. "An alley?"

He kissed her. He couldn't keep his mouth away, his hands still.

Together they moved—further and further into the darkness . . .

She chose a comb from her bag, fluffed her hair in the light of a street lamp. He smoked a cigarette, looking down at her. His eyes and the cigarette glowed.

She put the comb back in her purse, snapped it shut. She lifted her head. "Now," she said. "The payment."

"What's the deal?" He stood against her. He wanted to be in debt.

Her face looked like an angelic child's all set for the Christmas tree.

"There's a watch at Solly Klein's. In the window. I want you to get it for me."

He smiled. "All I need is a brick. And a dark night."

She smiled back at him. "I don't want it that way. I want you to go in, and take me with you. I want you to pull a gun on him and take it from him. While I watch."

His smile faded. "But I ain't got a rod."

Her expression changed to scorn. "Welcher," she said. "You said *anything*." She turned to walk away.

"Wait," he caught her arm. "I'll get one. When? When, do you want to do it?"

Her face was soft, happy. "Tomorrow night. I've watched. He's all alone at ten, just before he closes. The cop is way down at the end of his beat. That's when we'll do it."

He nodded, slowly, then with vigor. "And after—" he said. His hands wanted her again. She pulled away.

"After," she said. "After I have the watch."

They waited in the shadows. He kept feeling the shape of the gun in the pocket of his dungarees. He felt just the same way he did before a rumble, like ants climbed up and down his back, in his

stomach. She was calm, quiet, there beside him.

At five minutes of ten they moved across the street, arm in arm. Solly Klein sat behind his cage like an oily Buddha. A little bell tinkled from atop the door when they opened it. Solly Klein looked up.

He wore steel-framed glasses. Their thick lenses made his eyes look like grey-blue marbles down a well. He stood up and came around the cage, behind the counter. He put fat stubby hands with dirty nails on the counter top, leaned his weight on them.

"Yes," he said. He had a little lisp. "What can I do for you?"

Sylvia spoke. "I'd like to see the watch in the window." She had a blue ribbon around her hair. She looked very young.

Solly moved forward on flat feet. He wore leather slippers with hard heels that slapped when he walked. He took the jewelled watch from the window, brought it to them. His face wore a smile, like a pumpkin.

"Very nice," he said. "The lady has good taste."

Sylvia took the watch from its case, slipped it on her arm. The lights from the ceiling twinkled in the stones. It winked and blinked up at her. It snuggled on her wrist.

She looked up at Patsy. "Now," she said and moved back.

The gun came out of his pocket, pointed its snub nose at Solly Klein.

Perspiration suddenly broke out on Solly Klein's forehead.

"Thanks," said Patsy and started to turn, still with the gun on its target.

Solly Klein's fat hands trembled, began to move.

"Patsy!" screamed Sylvia. "Shoot! He's got a gun."

Patsy's gun spoke and a thin trail of smoke came from its muzzle.

Solly Klein's eyes, magnified in their wonder, grew larger, then slipped away. The round body quivered, swayed slightly from side to side. The knees bent, the arms fell and the body of Solly Klein slid, not without grace, to the dusty floor. He made a little sound as he landed, as though he'd been socked in the stomach, had the air knocked out. Then there was no sound.

It was Patsy who moved first. He felt his Adam's apple rise and fall. "He—he reached for a gun." His voice sounded high. Not like his voice.

Sylvia's eyes were still on the body. "He reached for his handkerchief. It's there—in his hand." She might have been making conversation on a street corner.

"You're nuts," cried Patsy. "You told me he had a gun. And I thought he did, so I shot him. He reached for a gun!"

She tore her glance from the still form, looked up at him with clear eyes.

"I got the watch," she said, held it up for him to see. She looked down again. "Look, he's bleeding."

Patsy stared at the watch. "It looks like a phony. Dime store stuff. Come on, we got to get out of here."

She moved slowly, her eyes still on the dead Solly Klein.

"What does it matter," she said and he thought her eyes were shining. "The stones are pretty. Red like blood."

Patsy turned and bolted from the pawn shop. She followed—slowly. There was no one in the street, but he grabbed her hand, and ran.

She stopped him after a little way. They leaned against a wall, breathing hard. Then she stepped close to him, fitted herself to his long body, and put her face on his chest.

"Thank you, Patsy," her voice was sweet. "You paid in full."

She raised her face, put a wet, hot mouth to his. She wiggled against him, moved his hands to her breasts. "Now," she said, "another installment."

Patsy raised his head, moved it from side to side in disbelief. "I killed him," he muttered. "I never croaked a guy before."

"You will again," she said and kissed him.

His mouth was slack against hers. He pulled away, violently. "No! No!" he cried. "It isn't worth

it." He turned then and ran, and his running footsteps faded away in the night.

She walked home slowly, and as she walked she felt the sharp coldness of the jewels set around the watch.

At her home she let herself in quietly, went down the hall to her room. She closed the door softly behind her, turned on the light.

The sparkles leaped at her eyes and she smiled. She took the watch from her wrist and held it in her hand. Then she went to her dresser.

She saw herself in the mirror. Her mouth was parted, her eyes wide and dreamy. She smiled at the mirror as she dropped her hands and opened a drawer.

Without looking, she dropped the watch into the drawer. It lay there with its fellows. Gaudy squares, triangles, circles of bright glass. Rings, bracelets, pendants. Sylvia's collection.

Sometimes when she came home like this she undressed completely and took them all out, put them on all at once, but tonight she closed the drawer.

Then she went to the living room and waited for her father. She would cry and tell how she'd been raped and beg her father to leave town with her. And, like all the other times, she knew that he would do just as she asked.



Plagiarism Prohibited

There will be no more plagiarism in the *Grapevine*, Cook County Jail publication in Chicago, as long as Warden Jack Johnson is in charge. Johnson cracked down when he discovered that inmates were signing their own names to the works of Shakespeare, Byron and Whittier on the publication's literary page. "It's just as bad to lift an author's story, even if he's dead," Johnson told his prisoners, "as it is to steal his watch."

Drunk Driving

In New Orleans, an elevator operator was arrested for drunken driving of his elevator. Police Sgt. E. S. Tecoul testified that he had a "harrowing ride" up and down the six floors of a downtown office building.

Law Takes a Holiday

Law enforcement has had a rough time recently in Eau Claire, Mich. For five months the town (pop. 500) had a policeman, but no law to enforce. Later it had the laws, but no policeman.

It all began two years ago when town officials discovered that its set of ordinances had disappeared. Finally they worked out a new set, meanwhile hiring a policeman.

At the same meeting when the new ordinances were approved, the councilmen discharged the policeman. They explained that they couldn't afford the officer's \$3,600 a year salary.

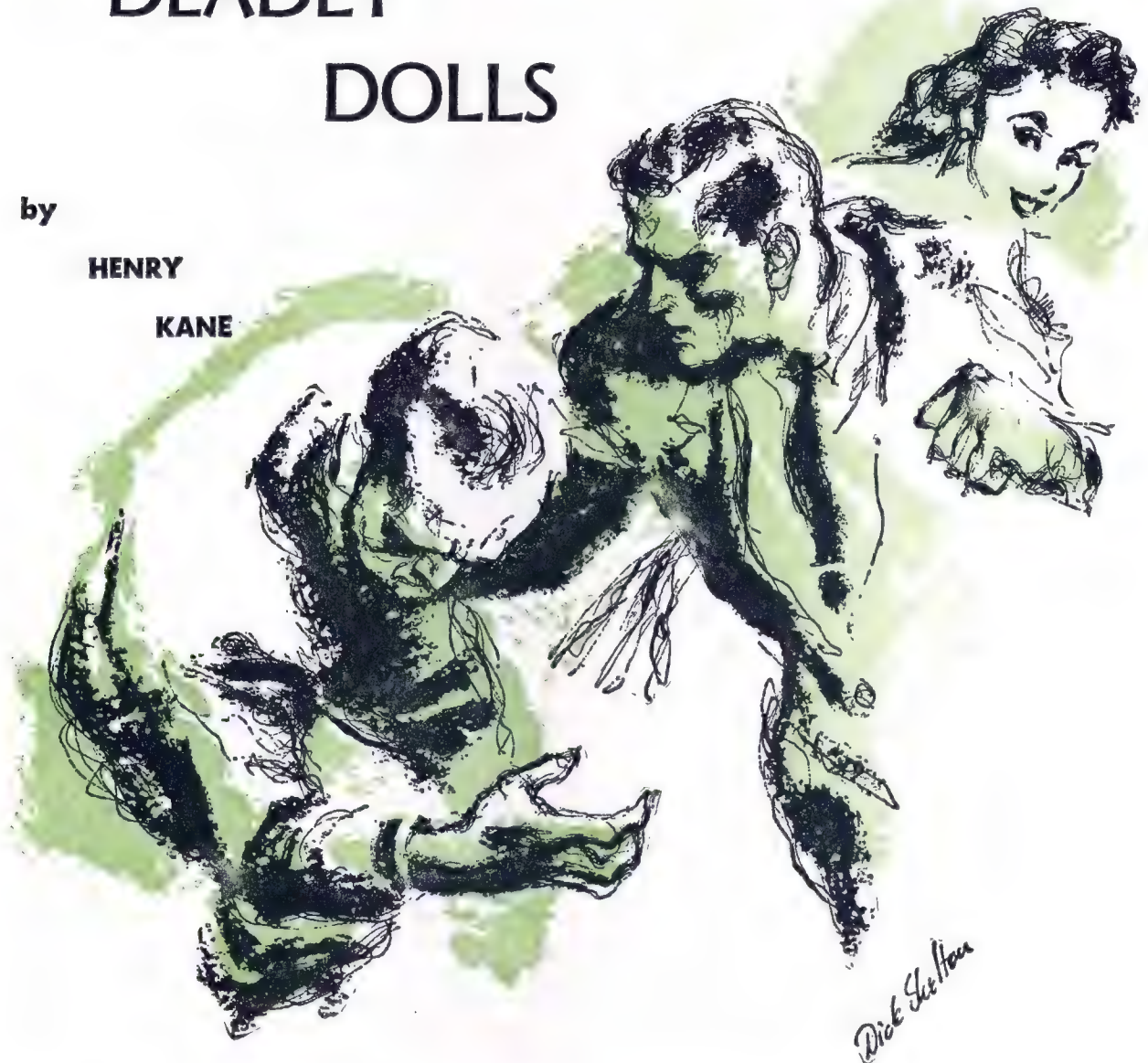
The DEADLY DOLLS

by

HENRY

KANE

Vivian Frayne—beautiful, but dead. My job, getting the killer. The catch, staying alive to enjoy the five grand fee.



I WAS lying around the house like a lox. In other words, I was lying around the house (which is a three room apartment with terrace on Central Park South) like a smoked salmon in an appetizing store, belly-side up and inert. I was lying around like a smoked salmon because I was bored. Even private detectives get bored. I was bored with skip tracings, and bill collectings, and tracking erring husbands, and untracking erring wives. In short, I was bored with the routine of my racket. Nothing of real interest had happened for months, and I'd had it. Right up to the gullet. So this day I had packed up and gone home. I had told my secretary that I was going to be lazy for

the day, that I would be at home, and that I was not to be disturbed unless it was something extra special.

Turned out to be something extra, *extra* special.

I was lying around, in comfortable briefs, lapping up the scandal of the tabloids—when the bell rang. Unthinking, I laid the newspapers aside, crawled off the couch, ambled to the door, opened it, and felt myself grow reverently rigid at the sight of such pulchritude so unexpectedly limned within my doorway.

"Mr. Chambers?" she said.

"Mr. Chambers," I said.

"I am Sophia Sierra," she said.

Sophia Sierra, so help me. That was the name. "Please come in, Miss Sierra," I said, and as she crossed the threshold and I closed the door, I hung on to the knob for support.

"The lady in your office," she said, "told me I would find you here."

"Yes, yes," I mumbled.

And suddenly, hanging on to a doorknob and ogling a Sophia Sierra, I realized I was utterly unclad except for the tightest and skimpiest of briefs.

"Forgive me," I said, relinquishing the doorknob and making a grotesque effort at a gentlemanly bow. "I . . . I didn't expect company. I . . . I'll go . . . I'll go make myself presentable."

Large dark eyes viewed me from tip to toe and back to tip.

"You're presentable," she said coolly. "Quite presentable. Quite, indeed."

"Thank you," I said, and I stood there, and we ogled one another, and I do not know what thoughts she had, but the thoughts I had might make themselves too obviously apparent, so I waved her to the living room, scampered to the bedroom, donned a T-shirt, slacks, socks and loafers, and scampered back to the living room—but not before I had had a fast glance at the mirror and a fast comb at the hair.

She was out on the terrace.

It was warm for this cool time of the year, and she had removed her coat. She was leaning on the balustrade—elbows resting and hands clasped—looking out upon the city: which gave me a moment to look out upon her. She was something to look out upon. She was a picture in black and white: a living, breathing picture in black and white. Her close-fit dress was black, her shoes were high-heeled pumps of the shiniest black, her stockings were the sheerest of jet black nylons. Her flesh was cream-soft white, and her dress was so cut that a good deal of the soft whiteness of flesh was exposed. She turned, suddenly, from the balustrade, straightened, and regarded me, standing there at the entrance to the terrace. She regarded me—I regarded her.

"I'm a messenger," she said.

"Messengers like this," I said, "should happen to me the rest of my life. Your name really Sophia Sierra?"

"Sophie Sierra," she said. "I'm Cuban."

"But you speak English perfectly."

"Oh, I was born here. I mean I'm of Cuban extraction."

"Like a drink?" I said, touching her elbow, moving her back to the living room.

"No, thank you," she said, and in the living room she stood stock-still, long-fingered hands on her hips, eyes moving over me. "I've heard about you," she said. "Heard you're kind of a ladies man."

"So?"

"Nothing. Except that, kind of, I can understand it." She moved near to me. Her face was inches away from mine. I could smell the musk-faint perfume of her. Her face was inches away from mine, but parts of her were touching me. She was built like that. "More than understand it," she said. "I've kind of got a yen. I'm crazy like that. I go for people before I know what it's all about."

"I'm kind of crazy like that myself," I said and I reached for her, but she moved away.

"I'm here with a message," she said, "from someone who's heard about you."

"Like who?" I said.

"G. Phillips," she said.

"G. Phillips?" I said. "I never heard of a G. Phillips in my life."

She went to her handbag and took out a yellow sheet of paper. She brought it to me. It was a telegram. It was addressed to S. SIERRA, 11 EAST 45th STREET. It said: PLEASE CONTACT PETER CHAMBERS AT ONCE. TELL HIM TO GET IN TOUCH WITH ME. TELL HIM WHERE. I MUST SEE HIM IMMEDIATELY. HE IS A FRIEND. G. PHILLIPS.

"Maybe I *am* a friend of G. Phillips," I said, "but you wouldn't know it from me. I never heard of a G. Phillips."

"Ever hear of a Gordon Phelps?"

"Gordon Phelps I heard of."

"G. Phillips is Gordon Phelps."

"Gordon Phelps!" I brushed past her and lifted one of the tabloids and turned to page three and pointed. "*This* Gordon Phelps?" I said.

"That's the one," she said.

The prize item on page three of my tabloid had to do with the murder of Vivian Frayne. Vivian Frayne had been a hostess in a dance hall called the Nirvana Ballroom. There was a photo of Vivian Frayne, a theatrical photo of a lush blonde loosely swathed in diaphanous veils. Vivian Frayne had been found the night before, in her two-room apartment on East Sixty-fourth Street, relaxedly attired in lounging pajamas, but quite dead nonetheless. Five bullets had penetrated the lounging pajamas making indiscriminate, deadly indentations within the body of Vivian Frayne. A gun had been found on the premises, but the newspaper report made no mention of the significance or insignificance of this find—other than reporting that "a gun had been found on the premises." It did report, however, in its last paragraph, that the police were seeking "one Gordon Phelps, millionaire playboy" in connection with their investigation.

"Gordon Phelps," I said, laying away the paper, "is G. Phillips?"

"Uh huh," said Sophia Sierra.

"And he sent you to contact me?"

"Just like it says in the telegram," said Sophia Sierra, staring at me.

"I don't get it," I said. "Couldn't he contact me himself?"

"Cops are looking for him. You just read it in the paper, didn't you?"

"Sure I read it. But he could have called me on the phone, couldn't he? He knows where."

"He's got no phone."

"Listen, Gordon Phelps owns a thirty-room mansion on Fifth Avenue, and I'd bet that joint has more telephones than rooms."

"He's not in his thirty-room mansion, sweetie. Otherwise the cops wouldn't be looking for him—they'd have him."

"You've got a point there," I said. "So where the hell is he?"

"In a little hideaway he's got—that only a few of his friends know about."

"Okay, so where's this hideaway?"

"Down in the Village. 11 Charles Street. Apartment 2 A. He's listed as G. Phillips. That's where you're supposed to go."

"Okay," I said, "I'm going. But couldn't he have called me from there?"

"No. Because it's a hideaway. A complete hideaway. Not even a phone."

"Check," I said. "Now what about . . . you and me?"

She went for her coat, slung it over one shoulder, turned and smiled. "What *about* you and me?" she said.

"Are we going to see each other?"

"You've got a date. For tonight. I work at the Nirvana Ballroom—"

"Like Vivian Frayne . . . ?" I pointed toward the crumpled tabloid.

"Just like Vivian Frayne," she said. "Nirvana Ballroom. Once you're a regular, it's kind of like piece-work. You show up whenever you feel like it. You throw on an evening gown and you're working—at fifty percent of what the suckers contribute. I'm a regular. I wasn't going to work tonight—and I won't—unless you're coming. Are you coming?"

"For you," I said, "I'm coming."

"Swell. I'm looking forward. I'll be at my best. I'll wear my red gown. In the Nirvana Ballroom, that's all you wear, practically—your gown. You'll die when you see me in my red gown, I promise you."

"I'll be there," I said. "Maybe late, but I'll be there."

"I'll be waiting." She waved, went to the door and opened it.

"About Vivian Frayne," I called. "Did you know her? Vivian Frayne?"

"I knew her," she said and she closed the door behind her.

And all that was left was the faint musk of her perfume.

I undressed, showered, and re-dressed for Gordon

Phelps. Gordon Phelps was not a friend. He was a guy I'd run into in the top-type night clubs, a guy with more loot than he could possibly spend, and a guy for whom I'd done a few favors, for a fee. He was a sixty-year-old runabout who still had plenty of vitamins jiggling inside of him. He had an austere attractive society-type wife who, it appeared, kept a slack rein on him, and he had, also, a fabulous town house on Fifth Avenue, a fabulous beach house on Fire Island, and a fabulous country house in Georgia. Now he had a hideaway. And *sinec* Gordon Phelps was ordinatorily generous in the matter of fees (he could afford it) I was quite as anxious to see Gordon Phelps as Gordon Phelps was to see me.

2.

"Glad to see you," Gordon Phelps said, when he opened the door of his apartment to me. "And it's about time."

"I made it as soon as I could, Mr. Phelps."

"What held you up? The sultry Sophia Sierra?"

"No, but she could have, if she'd had a mind to."

"Terrific piece, that one, eh? But look out there, sonny. She's just opposite of what she looks like. That little gal is all mind and no heart, and it's a mind concerned with one thing—gold, pure and simple. Gold, gelt, loot, dinero. But come on in now, young fella. We've got a hell of a lot of talking to do."

He led me through a small round foyer into an enormous exquisitely furnished living room, its floor moss-soft with thick rose-colored carpeting. Above the fireplace hung an oil of a rose-colored nude.

"Just beautiful," I said.

"Would you like to see more?" he said. He had a cultured, somewhat high-pitched voice, like a coloratura soprano who drank too much. "Everything's sound-proofed, by the way. And that fireplace really burns wood."

"Love to see more," I said.

He motioned me to a bedroom which was bleak compared to the warm comforts of the living room.

He showed me a bathroom with gold plumbing, and a kitchen with all the equipment including a deep-freeze, and then, back in the living room, over drinks, he said, "I could live here for months without going out once. There's enough food and drink—for months."

"Is that the way you'd like it?" I said. "Not going out for months?"

"That's the way I'd hate it. That's why you're here."

"Let's have the pitch," I said.

He paced with lithe steps. He was tall and

slender and rather graceful, muscular for his age. He had white wispy hair neatly parted in the middle, a pink face, a delicate nose, loose red libidinous lips, and narrow blue eyes beneath expressive not-yet-grey eyebrows. "I want to get out of here," he said. "And I want to get out of here soon. And I want *you* to get me out of here." He went to his desk, brought out an oblong metal box, extracted a number of bills, counted them and brought them to me. "Here," he said.

I don't have to be asked twice. I took the bills. I counted them. They amounted to five thousand dollars, money of the realm.

"That a fee?" I said.

"It's a fee," he said.

"Whom did you murder?" I said.

"I didn't murder anyone," he said.

"Not even Vivian Frayne?"

"Wise," he said. "A real wise son of a bitch, aren't you. No," he said, "I didn't murder anyone, not even Vivian Frayne, though she was asking for it."

"Then why are you holed up?" I said.

"Because, a little bit, I'm mixed in it."

"And you want me to un-mix?"

"Precisely."

I sighed again. I said, "Sit down, huh? Re-fill our glasses and sit down. Let's talk it up, huh? But I'm telling you right now, mixed or un-mixed, I keep the fee."

"Any way it turns out," he said, "you keep the fee."

"Anybody know about this place?" I said as he filled my glass.

"Very few. Most of those who know about this place—know me as George Phillips not as Gordon Phelps. I had my attorney—whom I trust—find this place for me, arrange for the lease and all that. I used a decorator to furnish—as George Phillips, and I paid him in cash."

"Your wife know about it?"

"Heavens, no. I don't think she'd like it. I think it would rile her. My wife can be quite fierce when riled. She also controls a good deal of . . . er . . . what shall I say . . . my fortune—she controls, with me, jointly, a good deal of my fortune. Her becoming riled could prove embarrassing to me, quite embarrassing—and embarrassing is an understatement, believe me."

"Then why do you do what you've done?"

"Why do any of us do things . . . we shouldn't quite do? We have compulsions, desires . . ."

"Yeah," I said. "How about Sophia Sierra? She knows that George Phillips is Gordon Phelps and—"

"But she doesn't know that it has any importance. It's just a guy using a different name, so that his hideaway can actually be a hideaway. She knows—as the world knows—that I have a good deal of latitude in my married life. It has

just never occurred to her that this latitude has any definition, any boundaries . . . thank heavens. I was drunk, one night, and I slipped—I suppose we all kind of slip sometimes. In a sense, I was boasting to Vivian Frayne, and Miss Sierra was present—"

"So Frayne knew you as Gordon Phelps too?"

"Yes."

"Did it worry you?"

"About Miss Sierra, no. I had hoped, soon, that I would be out of her orbit, that I'd just be another guy she had known and didn't know any more. Men keep happening to these girls . . . and the remote ones just fade away and are forgotten."

"And Vivian Frayne?"

"That one was different. She and I were much more intimate. She knew much more about me, made it her business, it seems, to know much more about me—"

"Kind of fodder for blackmail, wouldn't you say?"

"It *was* fodder for blackmail, I *would* say."

"Frayne?"

"Yes."

"Let's start at the beginning, Mr. Phelps. Let's have it from scratch."

He sipped his drink and set it down. He ran a tentative fingernail through his hair. His face creased into the pained expression of a constipated goat. "We're all human," he said. "Let's put it that way, we're all human. I like girls. I like girls who are young, strong, beautiful, vital. I don't like the people in my own sphere. I—how shall I put it—I seek out, sort of, the lower depths, the physical, passionate people of a world other than my own. Perhaps I have a need to feel superior, perhaps my emotions are whipped to—"

"Okay," I said, "with the abnormal psychology. I dig. Let's move it from there."

"I am a frequenter of dance halls—low, cheap dance halls. There, I am most superior. I am a millionaire. There are few millionaires in cheap dime-a-dance dance halls. And yet, you would be surprised at how many of the girls working in these dives are young, sweet, well-shaped kids from out of town—"

"Not me. I wouldn't be surprised."

"There are bags, but there are beauties—kids trying to make a buck, kids with no talent, no knowledge, no assets, except youth and beauty. I get acquainted with these charming kids, I move slowly, I have patience, and, most of all in my favor, I have a good deal of money to throw around—and basically these kids have one prime need: money. Like that, and in that element, I can compete with my younger brethren. It was about six months ago that I went to the Nirvana Ballroom. As George Phillips, of course."

"But of course," I said.

"Originally, I was attracted to Sophia Sierra—"

"Can't blame you," I said, thinking of curves. "But that one was too mercenary for me. She was right on top of the ball all the time."

"What did you expect?" I said. "That she'd fall in love with you? Why, you can be her father, for Chrissake."

"I smell maleness," he said, "and I smell youth, and male ego, and a definite interest in Sophia Sierra. I smell Peter Chambers on the hunt, and I warn Peter Chambers right now. Take it from an old hand, Peter—not your youth, nor your maleness, nor your interest, will carry you one whit with Sophia Sierra. That one, at this moment in her life, is whore, all whore, period."

"Thanks, Dad," I said. "Now get off the lecture platform. What happened with Sophia Sierra?"

"I took her out, showed her the town, let her see things big. I bought her a few frocks, a few dinners, advanced her a little cabbage, let her feel that papa was well-heeled and charitable."

"Did you make it?"

"No."

"Could you have?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I got close, but I didn't get where I wanted to get. And then she came up with the lalapaloosa, and I took a raincheck."

"Lalapaloosa?" I said.

"Ever hear of Elia Strassan?"

"Sure I've heard of Elia Strassan. Probably the greatest dramatic coach ever produced in America. Guy was in his prime about ten years ago, then he got sick and retired. What's Elia Strassan got to do with this?"

"Sophia Sierra propositioned me. Seems she wants to be a great dramatic actress. Seems she wants to study with Strassan."

"But he's not having any . . . or is he?"

"Private tutorship, Sophia told me. Told me that Strassan wanted ten thousand dollars—in advance—for a year's private tutorship. Wanted the money from me, she did, to pay over to him."

"Did you give it to her?"

"I checked."

"Whom?" I asked.

"First, Strassan. Guy'd had a stroke, was confined to a chair, wasn't teaching any more. But that little lass had gotten to him, made him happy, somehow, right there in his wheel-chair. Because Strassan verified for her, said he'd be willing to take her on, privately, for a year, for ten thousand. He needs ten thousand like a hole in the head; the guy's independently wealthy. So I checked some more. Dear Sophia had pulled this thing before—grabbed a few suckers—seems there are others like me who look for kicks in dance halls. Strassan covered for her, for reasons known only to himself." He drank deeply of his drink. "That baby doesn't want to be an actress. All she wants is to garner a great big bankroll while she's young enough and beautiful enough to garner it. That's

all that's on her mind—loot, big loot. And she uses that dance hall as a base of operations. Strange kind of whore, that kid, but all whore. I passed."

"To Vivian Frayne?"

"Yes. Quite another type. Blonde, older and much softer. About thirty, but quite lovely. Kind of a schizo. All soft on one side, all hard on another. Queer dame, but we made out well."

"And Sophia Sierra?"

"Like unto burst with anger. Didn't blame me. Blamed Vivian. Hated her guts, at having lost me to her. Felt that Vivian had put the hooks in. Hated Vivian, but stayed along with me as a kind of lost friend."

"And you and Vivian?"

"Went along for months, and most satisfactorily. But suddenly she began to swing the big bat too, looking for a home run."

"Like how?" I said.

"Like a sudden interest in travel. Wanted two years in Europe, felt it would broaden her. Tell you the truth, I'd have been glad to be rid of her, if the request were within reason. I'd had enough. I was ready to move on to greener pastures, or should I say blonder. She wanted fifty thousand dollars."

"What?"

"Fifty thousand. For two years in Europe. And—to be *absolutely* honest—I might have considered it. If I didn't realize it was blackmail, pure and simple—blackmail."

"When did she make the play?"

"About two weeks ago."

"And what did you tell her?"

"Oh, I was . . . indecisive. I wanted to think about it, because I was worried. It was, really, the first time, in my varied escapades, that the individual involved with me knew exactly who I was."

"Indecisive or no—did it come to conclusion?"

"Not exactly."

"What interfered?"

"I . . . I suppose she did, really."

"How?"

"She died."

Now I was pacing. I helped myself to another drink, neat, one gulp, and slam of the glass. "You kill her?" I said.

"No."

"Did you think about it?"

"Yes. To be frank, yes. Things like that enter anybody's mind when . . . when they're frightened. I don't know if she would have gone through with her . . . with her implied threat—she just wasn't the type—a sweet, kind person, really—but I do admit to being terribly concerned."

"Now, look," I said. "You've known this girl intimately for a few months. Have you any idea who—who might have wanted to—to—was there anyone of whom she was afraid, anyone who

might have had some definite motive for—”

“Sophia Sierra,” he said.

My head tilted as though a finger had been stuck in my eye. “Sophia Sierra?” I said. “Now how far can a man go when he’s put out about not being able to make it with a dame—”

“That’s not it, not it at all.” He was excited now and showing it. “I’m not accusing Sophia of anything. You’re asking. I’m telling. I know that Vivian was afraid of her, afraid of her Cuban temper, afraid of the smouldering hatred within her. Sophia was convinced that Vivian had stolen this sucker from her, and Vivian was convinced that Sophia had a deep and lasting hatred burning within her. She told me that, told me that many times.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Simmer down, Mr. Phelps. Anyone else that Vivian might have mentioned?”

He looked like a thought had just hit him.

“Okay,” I said, “what’s occurred to you?”

“A threat. A kind of threat.”

“From whom. To whom?”

“From Steve Pedi to Vivian.”

“Steve Pedi?” I said.

“He owns the Nirvana Ballroom. A rough, tough, capable man. I overheard a conversation, there at the Nirvana . . .”

“Between whom?”

“Between Pedi and Vivian.”

“When?”

“Oh, a couple of weeks ago. I was there, at the Nirvana. Vivian had gone upstairs—Pedi has his office upstairs. I had waited for her, at a table, and when she hadn’t returned, I had gone up after her. Steve Pedi generally has one of his bouncers stationed outside his office—his favorite bouncer, fella called Amos Knafke. Amos wasn’t there when I went up there—had other business, I assume. The door to Pedi’s office was open, and I was able to overhear the tail end of an argument between Vivian and Pedi. She was saying something like: ‘I know just what the hell’s going on around here, Steve Pedi, and you’re making criminals out of a lot of nice sweet kids, and I think you stink, I really think you stink out loud. And you’re going to put a stop to it, and do it fast, and if you don’t, I’m going to the cops, so help me, I’m going to the cops. I always knew you were rotten, but you’re even more rotten than I thought.’ That’s the way it ran.”

“A nice bit of dialogue,” I said. “Do you know what it was about?”

“Haven’t the faintest idea,” Gordon Phelps said.

“Did she get a reply?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “Something like: ‘Sister, let me tell you something, for your own good. You’re moving in over your head, you and your damned Puritanic ideas. Butt out. Keep your nose clean, or you’ll get your head handed to you, and with a couple of holes in it. Now, that’s final.’ And her

answer, before I pushed in the door, was: ‘And so’s this final Stevie. Unless you put a stop to this thing, and within the next couple of weeks, I’m going to the cops with it, and then *you’ll* get your head handed to you. And it’s got holes in it already.’”

I squinted at him.

I said, “Any ideas on what that was about, ‘You visit her often, Mr. Phelps?’”

“None whatever,” he said. “I pushed in and they both greeted me with smiles, forced smiles, true enough, but smiles.”

“Anyone else?” I said. “Anyone else on your list of possible suspects—aside from yourself?”

“No one else,” he said. “Not that I know of.”

I marched around quietly. He watched me march. Then I came back to him. I said, “I think the papers say she lived on East Sixty-fourth Street.”

“115 East 64th.”

“You visit her often, Mr. Phelps?”

“I never visited her, Mr. Chambers. I didn’t think it would be . . . er . . . circumspect. Let’s say . . . she visited here. Matter of fact, when I went off for vacations, she had *carte blanche*. She had a key to the place, of course.”

“Of course. When did she visit with you last, Mr. Phelps?”

He hesitated. “Last night,” he said.

“She was murdered last night,” I said.

“In her own apartment,” he said. “Not here.”

“When did she leave here?” I said.

“About midnight.”

“Wasn’t she working?”

“She took the night off.”

“She continue with the fifty thousand dollar trip to Europe?”

“She did.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“Told her I was still thinking about it.”

“And when she left—what did you do?”

“I went to sleep. I was dead tired.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“I slept terribly. I was up in about an hour. I was worried. I had a bite to eat and I put on the radio. That’s when I heard about—about what happened to Vivian.”

“What time was that? Do you remember?”

“I don’t know. About two-thirty, three, perhaps.”

“And what did you do?”

“Nothing. Sat glued to the radio, listening. I heard, after a while, that the police were interested in talking to Gordon Phelps.”

“Any idea how you got mixed up in it?”

“I assumed that she had mentioned my real name to some of her friends, and that the police had questioned these friends.”

“So why didn’t you go down and talk to the cops?”

“Simply because I didn’t want to get mixed up in it. There’s a difference between the police want-

ing to talk to Gordon Phelps—a friend of Vivian Frayne’s—and the police wanting to talk to, or having talked to, Gordon Phelps, Vivian Frayne’s lover. I didn’t want that smeared over the papers. Once they talked to me—they’d get it from me. On the other hand, once this damned murder is solved—it’s over. It’s off the front pages. It’s yesterday’s news. I’d be out of it.”

“So what did you do?”

“I wired my lawyer and had him come here. I had him go to the police and tell them that I was out of town on business, and that I was due back in a couple of weeks. I told him that he was to tell them that he didn’t know where I went, just out of town on business, back in a couple of weeks.”

“And then what’d you do?”

“Called your office, but you weren’t in. So I wired Sophia to get to you.”

“Why Sophia? Why not the lawyer?”

“Because, finally, I’m getting smart. Don’t put all your eggs in one basket. Lawyer, himself, might get suspicious when I’m cooking on all burners. Sophia, basically, is a friend. I’m a rich man. She knows that. Her very avariciousness keeps her being a friend.”

“Very clever,” I said. “Very psychological and all that. And now what do you do? Hide here until the thing blows over?”

“Or blows up.”

“Okay,” I said. I went to the door. “I’ve got your money and I’ve got your story. Let’s see what happens from here on out.”

“Please make it happen quickly,” he said. “And keep me informed.”

“Which necessitates my coming back here, doesn’t it?”

“How else?” he said.

“So let’s do it real whodunit, why don’t we? As long as you’re paying for my kind of brains, let’s do it with a system. Let’s make it five short rings, a pause, and then one long ring. When you hear that ring, you’ll be sure it’s me, you’ll know it’s Prometheus bringing fire to man.”

“Quite the card, aren’t you, Prometheus. But that ringing idea is a good idea, really. Hadn’t thought of it at all.”

There was a good deal, it appeared, that Mr. Gordon Phelps had not thought of.

3.

Mr. Gordon Phelps had not thought, for instance, of the possibility that a lady named Sophia Sierra might be attracted to a member of *homo sapiens*, gender male, without such member depositing a bag of loot at her feet like a sacrifice at an altar. He had not thought of the possibility that Sophia Sierra might be attracted to an in-

dividual half *his* age without such individual having to barter for her affections like they were jewels for sale in a forbidden marketplace. Gordon Phelps had not thought, for instance, that he had absolutely no alibi: the fact that he was alone in his hideaway apartment during the time of the murder of Vivian Frayne was exactly that—no alibi. He had not thought of the fact that he was a prime suspect, adorned, like a harpooned whale, by three deadly shafts, and all of them sticking out of him: motive, opportunity, proximity. He had not thought of the fact that, even if innocent, he was withholding information necessary and pertinent to police investigation of a capital crime. He had not thought of the fact that, no matter what his lawyer had told the police, they were, right now, in all probability, making every effort to seek him out and take him in. He had not thought of the fact that perhaps the police *had* thought of the fact that the lawyer was transporting a load of fertilizer shipped direct by the client. He had not thought of the fact that, perhaps, Sophia Sierra—

I stopped it right there.

Once it was back to Sophia Sierra—I stopped it.

I flailed fingers at a cab and had a ride through the morass of New York traffic to the precinct station wherein were housed the minions of the law in charge of Homicide in that section of Manhattan. There, too, was housed the brain and bulk of one Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, staunchest of the minions of the law: cop, friend, gentleman, human being. And there was informed, after prodding lesser minions, that the good Parker was on the “crazy shift,” the middle one of the three eight-hour tricks, that he was out, and that he had called in and was expected back in his office some time at about eleven o’clock.

That gave me time.

It gave me time to go to a fine restaurant and have a leisurely lonely supper. It gave me time to go home and divest myself of my clothes and put away a five thousand dollar fee. It gave me time to get into a warm tub and digest the supper and digest the facts I had about the murder of a dance hall lady named Vivian Frayne. It gave me time to think about Gordon Phelps (having his own kind of fun as George Phillips), and Vivian Frayne (having fun too until the fun stopped all of a sudden), and Sophia Sierra (and Phelps’ admonishment that she was as mercenary as an ancient Hessian), and Steve Pedi (who owned the dance hall), and the Nirvana Ballroom (which was the dance hall that Steve Pedi owned). Nirvana Ballroom. I knew where it was. On Broadway at Fifty-fifth Street. Nirvana Ballroom: perhaps the very name was a tip-off to Steve Pedi. It certainly was an imaginative name. Only someone with a weird imagination could have named it. Nirvana Ballroom. Nirvana. Nirvana, an expression contained in Buddhism, a religion that taught

that pain and suffering is a part of life, and that the extinction of all desire and passion is the entrance into Nirvana: the attainment of perfect beatitude. I thought, as I climbed out of my warm tub, that to some of us Nirvana can signify the beginning of true life, but to others, Nirvana can also mean death.

At ten o'clock in the evening—fresh, clean, unsullied and unphilosophical—I presented myself at the Nirvana Ballroom.

Mr. Steve Pedi was running an enterprising joint. You paid an admission of a dollar and a half, trudged up a flight of stairs, passed through an arched doorway and entered upon a crowded blue dimness. There were at least three hundred couples on the floor, swaying in various embraces to swoosh-soft music wafted from an excellent orchestra on a podium to the right. I had to squint to get accustomed to the gloom of the manufactured lovers' twilight. To my left, there was a carpeted stairway, going up. In front of me was a wooden barrier with swinging-gate breaks for entrance to the dance-floor proper. Against the inner section of the barrier lounged shapely young ladies in enticing attitudes, smiling invitingly at each new customer as he entered. The customers smiled back or gaped in embarrassment at the ladies, all of them encased in shimmering evening gowns. I moved along the barrier looking for Sophia and could not find her. I found a roped-off section, in an area even dimmer than the rest of the place, that contained chairs and tables and huddled couples. I also found a bar.

I went to the bar.

"Scotch and water," I said.

"Sorry, no hard stuff," the bartender said. "Against the law. We got coffee, raisin cake, all kinds of soft drinks, soda, and ice cubes if you need them. This the first time you been here, Mac?"

"First time," I said. "Got a date with a young lady, kind of. A Sophia Sierra."

"Sophia? Man, you got taste. I'll say that for you right off the bat. Sophia Sierra. Man, that's a chick what's got everything, and got it all in the right places." He jerked his head toward the roped-off area. "She's sitting there with some broken-down joe. He ain't nothing, Mac. My money's on you."

"Thanks," I said and started for the chairs and tables.

"Hey," the bartender called.

I went back to the bar. If his call was a raucous hint for a tip, he was entitled to it. I reached for my wallet, but he stopped me. "Nah," he said, "it ain't that. It's only you ain't allowed in there without no tickets." Now he jerked his head toward a booth that was fitted out like a box-office for a movie house. "Over there," he said. "They're a buck for ten tickets, each ticket a dance, but a

dance is prackly thirty seconds. Got a tip for you, Mac, seeing as you're new here. Got two tips. Get a whole load of tickets if you want to make a hit with any of them gals, especially Sophia, she's class."

At the booth, I got twenty dollars' worth of tickets. I carried them like a torch as I maneuvered through the dimness amongst the chairs and tables of the roped-off area, seeking my Sophia.

Off in a corner, she was seated at a table vis-a-vis to a grizzled little man whose wizened face surrounded a pair of glittering eyes that could have hypnotized a snake. I hated to break up the party, but after all, I had a date. "Sorry," I said. "Just flew in from Las Vegas to see my girl. It's kind of a one night stand, just tonight. Got to be back on the job tomorrow. Got to make a living, you know. Hate to cut in like this. But we're engaged, you know. Flew in all the way from Vegas for a lousy one night stand. Tough when you've got to make a living. Tough when you've got a girl in New York. I hope you understand, Mr. . . . Mr. . . ."

"Feninton," he piped. "Hiram Feninton."

"Oh, I told you he'd come," Sophia said. "I told you I was hoping he'd make it, Mr. Feninton."

"Yes, yes, you did," Mr. Feninton said. He stood up, a small bow-legged frightened-looking little man with beady eyes. "You're a lucky young man, young man," he said, "lucky young man. I envy you, truly envy you. Youth, youth," he said with sudden laconic logic. "Go fight youth." His hand fumbled in his pocket, brought out a sheaf of bills, and he peered intently as he selected one and handed it to me. "Here," he said. "Take it. Let Feninton play Cupid to young love tonight." Then his other hand reached into another pocket and he slipped me a pint bottle that had the feel of a whiskey bottle. "On me, on me," he said. "Let this evening be on me." He bowed toward her, the glittering eyes consuming her. "We'll make it another evening, Miss Sierra, another evening. I'm looking forward, if I may, to another evening."

"Of course, Mr. Feninton," she said.

He bowed to me. And then his bow-legs carried him away into the dimness, and he was gone.

I sat down, still holding the money and still holding the bottle. Almost at once my knees met hers beneath the table, and almost at once one of mine was taken by two of hers, like a caress, and held warmly.

"I'm a little bit drunkie," she said, the pressure of her knees tightening a mite. "Just a little bit drunkie. Got a little bit drunkie, kind of waiting for you, hoping you'd show up."

"I thought the hard stuff wasn't allowed here," I said.

"It's not. Here in town, dance halls don't have a license for liquor. But you can kind of bring it in, and they provide you with set-ups, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," I said. "And Mr. Feninton brought it in?"

"He sent out for it." She took two clean glasses from a tray and put one in front of me and one in front of her. "What's left in the bottle?" she said.

There wasn't much. I emptied it, half in her glass, half in mine. It was Scotch, of an expensive brand.

Her hand went to the seltzer bottle and she held it poised over my glass. "How much do you like?" she said.

"Up to half," I said.

"Me too," she said and squirted seltzer into my glass and into hers.

We drank Mr. Feninton's whiskey.

"I'm drunkie," she said, setting down her glass, "but don't worry, I get over it easy."

"I'm not worried," I said.

"I go for you," she said. "I'm crazy and I know it, but I go for you."

"I'm crazy too," I said. "I go for you." I brought up the bill the man had given me. "Have a donation," I said, "from Mr. Feninton. For young love out of Las Vegas."

It was a hundred dollar bill. She took it and put it into her purse. "This is a crumb joint," she said. "Once in a while you get them like Feninton, but you don't get them often."

"What the hell are you doing here?" I said.

"Where else can a girl earn maybe three hundred dollars a week? Like to dance?"

"Sure," I said. "Let's dance."

She stood up. She wore a red silk dress, no stockings, and red silk spike-heeled shoes. She wore absolutely nothing else.

"Let's dance," she said.

I handed up the string of tickets.

"Forget that," she said, and she flung the tickets to the table. "Let's do it like Mr. Feninton said. Let's make this evening on him."

That gave me my little moment of triumph. I stood up, thinking of Gordon Phelps. This was the girl who, according to him, had a steel-trap mind cast in the mold of a cash register. Maybe. Maybe, according to him. But maybe not according to me. Maybe Peter Chambers, for some cockeyed reason of *his* own, had gone overboard for Sophia Sierra. Bing. Like that. Out of left field. Why not?

I stood up and took her arm and led her to the blue-streaked dimness of the dance-floor. We danced. She was warm and soft and clinging, and her body yielded to mine, and we ground together, lightly, in a primitive caressing embrace, swaying to the music. Prickles of sweat were hot on my spine. I did not gasp because I was ashamed to gasp. I held her and I attributed the dizziness to Feninton's whiskey. And now her cheek was against mine again and her giggle was alive at my ear. "Perpendicular prostitution," she said. "It's part of the racket, taxi-dance racket."

"Let's sit," I said.

"You angry with me?" she said. "Because of what I said?"

"I'm nuts about you," I said.

"That's the way I want it," she said.

We danced for a few moments, most conservatively, and then we broke it up and went back to the table and sipped at Feninton's highballs and I said, "I saw G. Phillips."

"I figured," she said.

"You know what he wants?"

"I imagine he wants to get out from under—on the Vivian Frayne thing."

"Why should he want to get out from under?"

"The cops are looking for him. And it's my hunch he killed her."

"Why should he? Why should G. Phillips kill V. Frayne?"

"Because it's my hunch she was sticking a finger in his ear. For a little blackmail."

I leaned back and I looked at her. She was a smart girl. A very smart girl. Too smart, perhaps.

"That's a cute bunch of hunch you've got," I said. "Want to tell me about it?"

"G. Phillips," she said, "is Gordon Phelps. Gordon Phelps is a millionaire. He's got a wife who wouldn't kind of like it if she knew *all* about him—"

"How do you know?"

"I get around, lover. Anyway, that sets the guy up like a pin in a bowling alley. Leave it to V. Frayne to roll the ball."

"What about S. Sierra?"

"Now what the hell does that mean, lover?"

"Means," I said, "that if he was a set-up for V. Frayne, he was just as much a set-up for S. Sierra. Both of you knew he was Phelps—he talked out of turn one night while both of you were present. Nobody else around here knew he was Phelps—unless either of you talked."

"We didn't."

"So he was a set-up for either one of you. Logical?"

"No. Because there are people who are capable of blackmail, and there are people who are not."

"You're not?" I suggested.

"Damn right I'm not. Oh, I'm no angel, don't think I'm trying to give you that idea. But there are people and people, and people are . . . how do you say it? . . . complex, crazy, mixed-up. There are people who can kill, but love their mothers and their children. There are people who can steal, but cannot kill. There are—"

"Okay," I said. "There are people and people. What kind of people are you?"

"I'm a people that thinks that blackmail is dirty, filthy, rotten. I couldn't do blackmail if my life depended on it."

"Could Vivian Frayne?"

"Sure-pop. Vivian was different. But she was people too. She thought blackmail was smart,

worked it pretty good in her lifetime. On the other hand, there was another side to Vivian Frayne. She could be good, kind, sweet—she was like a mother to most of the kids working in this joint. Now Vivian—

"You didn't particularly like her, did you?"

"That G. Phillips briefed you pretty good, didn't he?"

"Pretty good," I said.

"I hated the son of a bitch," she said.

"Enough to kill her?"

"I've got a temper."

"Temper enough to kill?"

"Only when it's at tip-top point. But I cool off after awhile."

"Did you cool off toward Vivian?" I said. "After she took a sucker away from you right under your nose?"

She stood up. Her dark eyes peered down at me, filmed with fear, or hatred. "I cooled off," she said. "You're a nosey son of a bitch, aren't you?"

"I'm paid for being nosey."

"Like how much?" she said.

"Like five thousand dollars," I said.

Her posture eased. She smiled. "At least it's a respectable buck," she said. "For being nosey."

"Who's Steve Pedi?" I said. I stood up beside her.

"He owns the joint."

"I'd like to go talk to him."

"You're liable to get bounced on your ear, lover, by an ape named Amos Knafke. Guardian of the portals."

"I'll take my chances with Knafke."

"I'd like to watch, hero."

"Be my guest," I said. "In fact, be my guide."

She led me to the carpeted stairway. I followed her up it and along a carpeted hallway to a door at the end, in front of which stood a massive man like a languorous behemoth. Knafke, no other.

"Steve Pedi," I said.

"So who wants to see Mr. Pedi," he said in a voice that sounded like gravel being sifted in a deep drum.

"Peter Chambers."

"Who's Peter Chambers?"

"Me."

"Who're you?"

"A guy who wants to see Mr. Pedi."

Eyes drowned in the fat of a face veered toward Sophia. "Who's the wise guy, Miss Sierra?" he rasped.

"He would like to see Mr. Pedi," she said.

The eyes came back to me. "If it's a complaint, buster, we got a complaint department. Mr. Pedi don't like—"

I did not have to do it.

I did it to impress Sophia Sierra.

He got two quick fists to the belly and they went in up to the elbow. I was ashamed as I stepped over him. Of course I did not hate him.

I opened the door to Pedi's office. "After you," I said.

Her eyes were wild. "Wow, you're crazy, you're a crazy man."

I had impressed Sophia Sierra.

She went through the open door and I went after her and closed the door behind me. A handsome, white-faced man stood up behind a desk. A very elegant man.

"Yes?" he said. "What is it? Hello, Sophia."

"Hello," she said and fell into a soft chair as though she were exhausted.

It was a large room, its walls cluttered with autographed photographs of celebrities. The furniture was good, big, expensive and comfortable.

"Yes? What is it, please?" he said.

"He wants to talk to you," Sophia said. "He's Peter Chambers. Mr. Chambers—Mr. Steve Pedi."

"How do you do?" I said.

"What happened to Knafke?" he said to Sophia.

"I laid him out," I said.

Pedi's thin lips tightened. He threw a glance at Sophia, another at me, came out from behind the desk, went to the door, opened it, cast a glance beyond, and closed the door.

He came to me. He extended his hand and I took it. He had a lot of strength in his hand for a slender man. "I'm glad to know you," he said. "You wouldn't want Knafke's job, maybe? Because if you would, you're hired. Right now."

"I'm not available," I said.

"Too bad," he said. "All right, what is it, please, Mr. Chambers?"

The door opened.

Knafke lumbered in.

"Where is he?" Knafke said. "Where is that mother-loving son of a bitch?"

"I'm here," I said, softly.

"Get out of here," Pedi said. "Out." And as Knafke stood indecisively, Pedi repeated. "Out, out. Go watch the door."

Knafke murmured, as he left, quietly closing the door behind him.

"What's the pitch?" Pedi said.

"It's personal, I think," I said.

"Personal, like what?" he said.

"Personal like about Vivian Frayne," I said.

"Out," he said to Sophia. "Wait for your boy friend downstairs."

She stood up, smiled at him, smiled at me, said, "See you," and moved to the door and out it.

"All right," Pedi said. "Let's have it. What's it all about?"

"Vivian Frayne," I said.

"You a cop?"

"No."

"What do you want, Mac?"

"I want to know if you threatened Vivian Frayne."

He thought that over. "Mac," he said seriously, "I

got a few more around here like Amos. If I want, I could have you chopped up and thrown out to the cats in the alley."

"Why should you want?"

"Because you're poking around. I don't like pok-ers. Who told you I threatened Vivian? You want to talk about that?"

"Sure," I said.

"You a peeper?" he said.

"That's right."

"Figures," he said. "All right, who said I threatened Vivian?"

"George Phillips."

"That old son of a bitch, huh? He's a liar."

I told him what Phillips had told me.

"He's a liar," he said when I was finished.

"Okay," I said. "Just checking." I went for the door.

"Just a minute," he said.

"Yes, Stevie?" I said.

"The cops didn't mention none of this to me. They playing it cool?"

"I don't know," I said.

"They pick up Phillips yet?"

"I don't know."

"If they did, he must have spilled this crap to them too. What do you think?"

"If they did, he did, that's what I think."

He regarded me for a long moment. He went to the desk, pulled open a drawer, brought out three new crisp one hundred dollar bills. "How you fixed for ethics?" he said. "Did the cops pick up Phillips yet?"

I took his three hundred dollars.

"No," I said.

"Thanks," he said. "Look, will you kind of keep me informed on how the thing goes? I ain't mixed in this, but—"

"I might, if it doesn't crash with the ethics."

"Thanks," he said and he walked to the door with me and opened it. "This is Peter Chambers," he said to Amos Knafke. "He's a real nice fella. Any time he wants to see me, it's my pleasure. Dig?"

"You're the boss, boss," Amos said.

"Good-bye, Mr. Chambers," Pedi said. "You're a nice fella. I respect a guy with ethics. I like you, like you very much."

"I'm thrilled," I said.

"Bye, now," he said and he closed the door and left me alone in the corridor with Amos.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Knafke," I said. "I'm a nothing. I was making with the showboat. I was trying to impress the girl. Maybe this can even it up."

I stuffed Pedi's three hundred dollars into the meat of Knafke's beefy palm.

Downstairs, I found the lady in red morosely stirring the dregs of Feninton's drink with the jagged end of a broken swizzle stick. "How'd you make out?" she said without looking up.

"About like I'd expected," I said. I looked at my watch. "I've got to get to work."

"Will you come back? I want you to come back. We're open here until four, you know."

"I'll try. I'll try my damndest."

4.

"I'm fouled up on a case," Lieutenant Parker said, when I got into his office to see him. "And it's a bitcheroo, all because it's got to do with a dame who had lots of glossy photos of herself, all of them sexy. So the newspapers are not going to lay off it."

"Vivian Frayne?" I said.

"You read the papers," he said. "The wrong ones." He sighed and stood up, rubbing a hand across his stiff black crewcut. He was short, broad, thick and stocky, with a ruddy face and bright dark honest eyes. "What brings you?" he said. "I'm told you were here before."

"Vivian Frayne," I said.

He did not move. His eyes were amused. "Okay," he said, "I feel a cockeyed deal coming on. A Peter Chambers special. What do you know, and what must I do to find out what you know?"

"Don't have to do a thing," I said, "except tell me about Vivian Frayne."

"And for that . . . ?" he said.

"I might produce Gordon Phelps."

That rocked him. He jumped like he'd been unexpectedly pinched, in an unexpected place. "Oho," he said. "A *real* Peter Chambers special. I want that guy and I want him badly. You working for him?"

"I'm afraid I am."

"Can you produce him?"

"I can't produce him right now."

"When can you?"

"Let's talk it up a little, shall we, Lieutenant? You help me, I'll help you. It's the old story—we're on the same side, you and I. It's only the approach that may be different."

"It may be, mayn't it?" he said. He went behind his desk, lay back in his swivel chair, lit up a cigar. "We're anxious about that Gordon Phelps. I'd like to squeeze that out of you."

"If you tried to squeeze, Lieutenant, I'd deny any knowledge. I think we're past that stage, the squeezing for information stage."

"Yeah," he growled behind cigar smoke. "Lawyer guy came in with cock and bull."

"I know about that," I said.

"Figured you would." He sat up. "When will you have him for me?"

"Let's say forty-eight hours. Maybe sooner, but let's say forty-eight hours at the outside. I'll either bring him in or I'll convince him to come in. Good enough?"

"And if we pick him up before that?"

"Then you pick him up. That's your business and I can't stop you from working at your business. One proviso. I don't want a tail on me. I'd lose him anyway, but why have to go through the bother?"

"Okay, no tail."

"Then we've got a deal, Lieutenant?"

"What do you want to know?"

"All about Vivian Frayne."

"Ain't much, really." He puffed on his cigar. He wrinkled his face, concentrating. "Dance hall dame. Been in New York about thirteen years. Wise little operator, always lived pretty good. Never in trouble, never caught up with law. Had a nice reputation, the gals in the dance hall adored her, she was kind of like a mother-hen to them. Investigation showed she'd been to Canada a couple of times, and that's all we know about her."

"What about background?" I said.

"Nothing," he said, "which isn't unusual. Vivian Frayne's probably not her real name. Dame comes in from Oshkosh somewhere when she's about seventeen, probably a runaway, or a go-offer with a guy. Breaks family ties, gives herself a fancy name, and gets lost in a city of nine million. Once there's no record on them, you just can't trace them back."

"What about the published pictures?"

"Those don't generally help either in these kinds of cases. These are sophisticated glossies—who can tie up this gorgeous mature woman with the kid of seventeen that scrambled Oshkosh. Even if she has a family, and they haven't forgotten her—those pictures wouldn't make the connection. These kinds of cases, you've got to work them from the present, from the recent life of the deceased. Background is out. If you fall into background, that's just a lucky break."

"Okay, Lieutenant," I said. "Let's have it."

"Want it chronologically?"

"Want it any way you'd like to give it."

"Chronologically," he said. "Sequence started here on Monday, late Monday night. She'd worked Monday, left the dance hall about four ayem, went home. Cab dropped her, and as it pulled away, two guys approached, a mug job. One stuck a knife in her back, the other did an armlock around her throat. But, as luck would have it, just then a cop turned the corner. They grabbed her bag and blew, but she struck out at one of them. She hit him and the knife dropped. The cop chased them, but they outran him, and blew. That's the Monday night bit."

"Did she see either one of them, I mean to recognize them?"

"No."

"Okay, I've got Monday night."

"It was a mugging, we figure it for a straight mugging, what with grabbing the bag, all in pattern. But we had the knife. There was one faint

smudge of a print on it, and the laboratory boys did a hell of a job. Worked all of Tuesday, and finally came up with it. We did the search and it turns out to be a grifter named Mousie Lawrence. Ever hear of Mousie Lawrence?"

"Vaguely," I said.

"A one-time loser, did a term about fifteen years ago for armed robbery, and that's the last we heard of him—until now. Didn't even know he was in New York. Fifteen years is a long time. New hoodlums grow up, you kind of lose track of the old ones unless they're in open operation. Anyway, early this morning, about seven o'clock, cops come calling on Vivian Frayne with the gallery-mug photo of Lawrence."

"But why if she's said that she hadn't recognized either one of them?"

"Just to see if she recognized the photo. After all, these guys were waiting for her practically at her apartment house. Maybe they were acquainted with her, met her at the dance hall. Like that, we'd have a better line on them, maybe she'd even be able to give us some information on the other mugger. Anyway, we wanted to see if she'd recognize the photo, if she'd have any angle on it. Reasonable?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"There was no answer to their ring. The milk bottles were outside the door, waiting to be taken in, but there was no answer to their ring at her apartment. One of the cops was a guy with brains, or maybe an impatient guy. He went down to the super, and had him open the door. They found her inside, dead. She was dressed in lounging pajamas. There were five bullets in her, and a gun on the floor beside her. The apartment was upside down, it had been thoroughly searched. And, mind you, when the super had opened the door, it had been locked—from the outside."

"Deadlock type of lock?"

"Yeah. You had to turn the knob on the inside to lock it, or lock it with a key from the outside. She was dead and the murderer wasn't there, so the lock had to have been locked from the outside."

"Cute," I said.

"Damn cute," he said. "Anyway, that's when I got into this, personally."

"You think that mugging had anything to do with the murder?"

"Matter of fact, I don't. Stands to reason. Whoever killed her was able to get in and out of that apartment. That's for sure. If these babies were able to get into the apartment, they'd have been waiting for her there, wouldn't they—if the job was for murder? But they were loitering outside, so they figure to be muggers, not murderers. We're checking that angle, anyway. Had Lawrence's photo passed around the dance hall, but the kids there clammed. Either they never saw the guy, or they don't want to get mixed with stooling on hoods. Kids in dance halls are hip kids. They stay away

from trouble, and it's trouble, let's face it, when you identify a hood."

"Got a photo for me?" I said.

"Sure. Had a lot of them made. We're looking for the guy." He opened the middle drawer of his desk, brought out two photographs, each about four by six, and handed them across to me. One was full face and one was profile. I looked at them briefly and put them away.

"Figure a time of death for her?" I said.

"About one o'clock Tuesday night, that's the best figure."

"Wasn't she supposed to be working then?"

"Took the night off, probably had a date."

"Any idea whom she had the date with?"

"Yeah, we got an idea. We got an idea she had a date with your client."

"Really," I said, and I shifted the subject. "The place was thoroughly searched, you say. Which seems to mean that whoever killed her was looking for something."

"Whatever they were looking for—they found it, I figure."

"Why?"

"Because we did a pretty good search ourselves. We found nothing that meant anything to anybody. All we got was the gun right there on the floor, and a diary."

"Ah," I said, "there we go. Always a diary."

"The gun was something," he said, "but ah the diary, that was nothing. The gun was the murder weapon, but the diary was a kind of new one, with only sporadic entries, which were mostly about somebody with initials G. P."

"This G. P. have a key to the joint?"

"Nope. Diary specifically says no. Diary says that G. P. was never even at her apartment. Though I bet she was at his. There's one key on her ring that we haven't found a door for. I bet G. P. is behind that door somewhere. She saw G. P. Tuesday night before she came home to get killed."

"How do you know that, Lieutenant?"

"Diary states the date with G. P."

"Brother," I said as I went to the door, "you're one guy who doesn't figure to jump to conclusions, in my book. Why link initials G. P. to Gordon Phelps?"

"Believe me, I haven't jumped to any conclusions."

"Have it your own way," I said. "Can I see that apartment, Lieutenant?"

He looked dubious.

"You really want Phelps, don't you?" I said.

"Well, you can have him within twenty-four hours. Now can I see the apartment, Lieutenant?"

Again he opened his desk drawer and dipped into it. He threw me a bunch of keys. "You know the address?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"Good luck," he said.

"Any prints on the gun?" I said.

"None," he said. "Smudges, no prints. And no prints in the apartment that could do us any good."

"It's still bothering me," I said.

"What?"

"Why you insist on linking initials G. P. with Gordon Phelps."

"There happened to be a serial number on the gun. That told us, after checking, that the gun belonged to a gentleman playboy by the name of Gordon Phelps."

I trudged the dark city streets from the precinct station house toward Broadway. I dangled keys in my pocket and facts in my brain. The keys jumbled and so did the facts. Parker knew nothing and neither did I. I had a couple of extra facts, but still I knew nothing. I knew where I could lay my hands on Gordon Phelps, and Parker didn't, but that did not bring me closer to the same solution Parker was seeking. And I knew more about Mousie Lawrence than Parker did, but that was because he was law and order and I was law and disorder.

Mousie Lawrence, born Morris Lawrence, was a fifty-year-old man with the moral scruples of a hungry hyena. He was small, wiry, rough, tough and heartless. Fifteen years ago he was still groping, clawing for his niche in the world of his peers—that was when he was apprehended and jugged for armed robbery. But Mousie was not stupid and he had come a long way since then. Ten years ago, he had hooked up with a major narcotics outfit operating out of Mexico City, and he had been paired off with Kiddy Malone. They had fitted together like a nut and a bolt, they had complemented one another: they were a rousing success in the nefarious traffic which was their milieu. They were front men, advance men, salesmen. Operating out of Mexico City, and with limitless funds at their disposal, they descended upon various points in the United States where they set up depots, organized intricate personnel, managed and stayed with an operation until it was meshed, geared, flawless, and self-performing. Then they retreated to home base, where minds concentrated on the next site of burgeoning business for this enterprising duo. Mousie was a sour little man, dry and humorless, and a teetotaler both of alcohol and drugs. Kiddy Malone was an addict, a small man like Mousie, but outgoing, robust, twinkling-eyed and happy-natured when he was on the stuff—and since he was in the business, he was always on the stuff. Kiddy's true Christian name was Kenneth, and I was much more intimately acquainted with him than I was with Mousie Lawrence. Kiddy was an Irishman out of Dublin. Fifteen years ago he had been a seaman who had jumped ship and had remained, without benefit of quota or citizenship, in the United States. Kiddy was a womans' man, and I had met him when he had got into trouble with

his first woman (or second or third or thereabouts). He had been effusively appreciative of my efforts in his behalf and a casual acquaintanceship had ripened into a rather ribald and entertaining friendship, until Kiddy had begun to sin with the syndicate, and I had begun to disapprove of the new ways and habits of one Kiddy Malone. Before long, Kiddy's papers were straightened out, a forged citizenship was forged for him, and he began to go to the right tailors, the right haberdashers, the right barbers, the right booters, and he began to flash bankrolls as thick as salami sandwiches. He also began to hit the stuff himself—a mainliner—and he became a personality. Then came Mexico City, his hookup with Mousie, and the flourishing of a successful partnership.

I hailed a cab, as I thought about Mousie and Kiddy. If Mousie was in New York, so was Kiddy, and if they were in New York, they were working on a deal, and if they were working on a deal, it was not the kind of deal that Parker was talking about. Mousie and Kiddy in a mugging act was as difficult to contemplate as Rogers and Hammerstein doing words and music for the pornography of a college-boys' stag party. Something stank.

At Fifty-fifth and Broadway, I paid the cabbie, and once again I paid admission for the privilege of entering into the fragrant dimness of the Nirvana Ballroom. I went immediately to the bar.

"Hi, Mac," said my bartender. "You back already?"

"Who can resist Nirvana?" I said.

"You looking for Miss Sierra?"

"Yes," I said.

"She ain't in a good mood, if you ask me. What did you do to her, Mac?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Maybe that's why she ain't in a good mood. Why don't you go try again?"

"I'm going," I said.

This time I bought one dollar's worth of tickets. I found the lady in red seated at exactly the same table, and alone. She seemed to be studying the untouched drink in front of her, but that study was not all-inclusive because she said, without looking up, "Sit down, lover. Glad you're back. Have a drink. Glasses on the tray, bottle under the table. And it's Scotch."

I reached and found the bottle and it had hardly been used. I poured, restored the bottle, said, "You off the stuff?"

"Oh, I don't deny I like to drink," she said. "But I like to drink with company I like. You're company I like, but you weren't here. Where were you?"

"Looking at pictures," I said and I brought them out, full face and profile, and I handed them to her quick-like, all of a sudden—and I saw her start before she pulled back into control. "Do you know the guy?" I said.

"No," she said and returned the pictures.

"Ever see the guy?" I put the pictures back in my pocket.

"Where'd you get those pictures?" she said.

"A friend of mine gave them to me."

"Give them back to him. Because they're trouble."

"How would you know? You never saw the guy, remember?"

"I'm psychic," she said, and she smiled, and I wished I could stay with her.

"I'm going up to see your boss again," I said.

"Look, let's stop playing shuttle-cock. You my date for this evening, or no?"

"Yes, but I got work to do in between."

"Well, if you're not back within an hour after you get out of here, I'm not waiting. We'll catch up another evening."

"I'll try to be back," I said.

"It's your life," she said. She looked at me, dark-eyed sullen for a moment, looked past me. "Don't bother going upstairs for the boss," she said. "He's at the coffee-bar, and he's watching us as if he's expecting us to break a law."

I did not turn around. I said, "I'd like to talk to him alone."

"You mean you want me to blow?"

"Just so's I can talk to him alone."

She stood up and kissed the top of my head, lightly. "Good bye, crazy-joe. The hell with you."

She went away.

I reached down for the bottle to add more color to my drink and saw the well-shod feet stop at my table. I said, still stooped for the bottle, and just to impress him with my prowess as a peeper: "Sit down, Steve. Have a drink. On the house."

I heard his chuckle.

"Not drinking," he said. "Thanks. But I'll sit."

He sat.

I put the bottle back under the table.

He reached across the table for my drink and drank from it. "I'm going to break down for you, fella," he said. "Because that son of a bitch George Phillips tried to give you information that put me in the middle."

"Like what?" I said.

"Like that bull about my threatening Vivian."

"That was bull?"

"Bull," he said. "He's full of it. His name isn't George Phillips; it's Gordon Phelps."

"Who's Gordon Phelps?" I said.

"A very rich bitch," he said, who as George Phillips has himself a ball."

"How do you know?" I said.

"Vivian told me."

"Why did she tell you?"

"Because like she had him hooked. Because like she was trying to figure out how to make it pay off. So she took me into her confidence. She asked me for advice, how she could put the hooks in."

"And did you tell her?" I said.

"I don't monkey in that stuff. And if I did, I wouldn't monkey with a dame like Vivian. She was too . . . unpredictable."

"So how'd she do with Phelps-Phillips?"

"She discussed him with me. She had him hooked. He really went for her. Even gave her a gun once to protect herself. She asked me to check if he was really Gordon Phelps. I checked. He was. Then she figured she'd hit him for fifty—fifty big ones. She asked me if he could stand a shove like that. I told her he could."

"So?"

"So, maybe even if he could stand that shove, he figured it would only be the first of many."

"Are you trying to say he killed her?"

"He tried to put me in the middle, didn't he? I figure he told you what he was supposed to have overheard between me and Vivian—to put you on to me for that murder. Okay, so I'm putting it right back on him. Like that we're even up. You go from there, fella."

"Where do Mousie and Kiddy go?"

"Pardon!" he snapped.

"Mousie Lawrence and Kiddy Malone."

"You're using fancy names, fella. Better watch your step."

"You know them?"

"No."

"It gets around to murder—everybody tells a lot of lies, Stevie." I pushed back from the table and stood up.

"You leaving our attractions?" he said and the capped teeth gleamed in an ironic smile.

"Reluctantly," I said.

"Why don't you stick around? I been told Sierra's done a flip. Sierra don't flip often. Why don't you take advantage of it?"

"Got to go talk to people," I said, "to people that talk the truth. I'm going to talk to a stoolie, Stevie. Wish me luck."

"Good luck," he said and his soft voice had the flat rasp of a dull knife cutting stale bread.

5.

Lorenzo's was a discreet supper club between Park and Madison on Fifty-third Street, which served string music with its meals—fiddles, zither, and two guitars. It was a plush joint that catered to a late crowd. The inner room had a recessed upstairs gallery, much sought after by the stay-uppers: it was a mark of distinction or a mark of a large gratuity to the maitre d' to be escorted to the upstairs gallery. It was also the mark of having once been pointed out by the proprietor of the establishment.

I was instantly escorted to the gallery and I was seated at a corner table, alone. I inquired of Mr.

Dixon, and I was informed that he would be with me shortly. And shortly, he made his appearance, plump in a fastidious dinner jacket, smiling and affable. He was short, fat, smooth and bald, clear gray eyes swimmingly magnified behind the thick lenses of black-rimmed, studious, straight-templed spectacles.

"Ah, Mr. Chambers," he said in a voice like the purr of a cream-fed cat. "Always welcome." He sat down, sighingly, opposite me. "I am breathless in anticipation. I hope it's big."

"Not too," I said.

"That's what all my customers say—but, of course, since it is their money, they're prejudiced. I'm prejudiced too, I suppose, but let me be the judge. What is it, Mr. Chambers?"

"Steve Pedi. Mousie Lawrence. Kiddy Malone."

"Together, or separate?"

"Pedi is separate. Mousie and Kiddy are together."

"Which is as it should be," he said. "On one category, you're going to save money. What I have to offer on Pedi isn't worth any money."

"Will you offer it, please?"

"With pleasure," he said. "Stephan Burton Pedi owns a ballroom called The Nirvana. He bought the joint about ten years ago, but he didn't operate it himself. He had connections in California, Canada, Florida, and France—some kind of business connections. He'd come in, now and then, and look things over at The Nirvana, but he only took over active operation a few months ago."

"What kind of business connections?" I said.

"I don't know," Lorenzo said. "He's a shrewd guy, a smart apple, and he sits very strong with some of the best people."

"By the best people, I take it, you mean the worst people."

He shrugged, smiled. "He's fixed tip-top in the connections department. He's a good guy to stay away from, if you want my advice."

"I'm not here for advice."

"That's all I know about Steve Pedi. For free."

"What do you know about Mousie and Kiddy, not for free?"

He studied buffed fingernails, looked up and cocked his head at me. "I don't get you," he said. "I think you know about as much as I do about those two. Why are you trying to throw your money away?"

"I don't want to know about their past history. I want to know about their present. Are they here in New York?"

"Yes."

"How long they been here?"

"Oh, about a month, I think."

"Why are they here?"

"I don't know why they're here—yet. I'll know, sooner or later, but I don't know yet. You want to be in touch with either one of them?"

"You know where?"

He rubbed his hands together. "I sit worth a thousand bucks to you?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Lorenzo doesn't kid. You know that."

"And what do I get for my thousand bucks?"

"You get where they're staying, you get under what names they're staying, and you get information about the brand new gal Kiddy's palsy-walsy with."

"Deal," I said.

"Cash?" he said.

"What else?" I said. "You call at my office tomorrow at four."

"Excellent, dear Peter." He sat back, clasped his hands over his stomach, and closed his eyes as though he were communing with the spirits. His eyebrows came together in concentration as he said, softly. "Mousie is Emanuel Larson. Kiddy is Kenneth Masters. They have a suite at the Montrose Hotel, Fifty-seventh and First, Suite 916. Kiddy's new gal is a waitress, works in a fish restaurant on Fulton Street called Old Man Neptune. She's a red-head with a terrific shape, and she ought to be in a pleasant mood these days, because she's a user and Kiddy keeps her well supplied with the stuff. Her name is Betty Wilson, three room apartment at 244 West 65th Street, first floor, rear apartment to the right; there are four apartments on each floor, two in front and two in the rear; its an old brownstone, a walkup, and you don't have to ring downstairs if you don't want to because the entrance door is on the fritz and it doesn't snap shut on its lock." He opened his eyes. "Okay?"

"Wow," I said in wonderment.

The Montrose was one of those newly-built thousand-room monstrosities, tier upon jagged tier of stone and chrome, brick and steel. I stalked through the lobby as though I belonged there, went into one of the shiny-doored elevators, got out at nine, marched to 916, put my finger on the doorbell and squeezed.

Nobody answered.

I took the elevator back down to the main floor. I wanted a look-see into Suite 916. I was right there at the premises, and you never can tell what a look-see can turn up, even a fast look-see.

I went directly to the desk.

It was long and wide with a white marble top. There were five clerks behind it. I reached across and grabbed the lapel of the youngest of the three, a slender kid with a butch haircut, sad eyes, a white face and a black bow tie.

"I'm Jack Larson," I shouted. "I got a brother here. Emanuel Larson. 916."

"So what?" said the slender kid. "Leggo, will you, Mac?"

Two other clerks moved over. One was a portly, white-haired man with glasses.

"My brother called me," I shouted. "Called me,

threatening suicide. I got here fast as I could."

"Suicide?" breathed the slender kid.

"You heard me. Suicide."

I let go of the kid and he sagged. "Suicide," he breathed, wetting his lips.

The white-haired man took a ring of keys quickly, came out from behind the desk quickly, said, "All right, Mr. Larson, come along with me."

He was sprightly for a fat man. We ran across the lobby and into an elevator. "Nine," he said to the elevator boy, "and no other stops."

Upstairs, he opened the door of 916. All the lights were on. We went through a small square foyer into a large square sitting room. It was an expensive suite. But something in the middle of the ankle-deep carpet completely destroyed the decor of the room: Mousie Lawrence, fully dressed, and very dead. He lay, face up and hideous, his upper lip shot away and writhed back in a bullet-destroyed broken-toothed grin. His eyes were open in an unblinking fish-stare. His forehead and ears were stamped with the wax-yellow of death.

The white-haired man gasped, retchingly, as he bent to examine him. I did not have to bend to examine Mousie to know he was dead. Instead, I went through to the bedroom. That, too, was brilliantly lighted, but it was uninhabited. A shoulder holster, with pistol, was on the bed. Another holster, belt-type, and also with pistol, hung on the knob of the closet door. I opened the closet door. Clothes, nothing else. I went back into the sitting room. The white-haired man was on the phone, chanting, "Yes, yes, dead, Mr. Larson; no, Masters is not here . . ."

I went to the door. I took the elevator down; I crossed the lobby and walked out into the street.

I walked all the way from Fifty-seventh and First to Forty-second and Park where the Automat stayed open all night. I had a cup of coffee and smoked many cigarettes. Whoever had killed Mousie had been a friend. Guys like Mousie and Kiddy didn't keep their artillery in the bedroom unless they were entertaining a friend in the sitting room—a friend, someone whom they trusted, that is, unless it was Kiddy himself who had put the blast on Mousie. That sort of thing has happened before: they both toss off their holsters, but one of them has an extra piece on his person and that is the piece he uses to put a splash on the ankle-deep carpet and spoil the decor of the sitting room. But why should Kiddy Malone kill Mousie Lawrence? Then again, why not? People fall out, even animals of the stripe of Mousie and Kiddy, and I could inquire into that because I knew where to catch up with Kiddy Malone. Where else would Kiddy Malone be, but with his brand new girl friend, Betty Wilson. There was no rush, however; I had time: I wanted Kiddy Malone well bedded-down before I called upon him. I sighed, grunted, pressed out my cigarette, mopped up the dregs of my coffee, went

out into the street, found a cab and asked to be taken to 115 East 64th Street.

Parker's keys were as welcome as penicillin in a bordello. Everything worked smoothly. One key opened the downstairs door, and in the vestibule a gander at the bell-brackets produced 4C as the Frayne apartment. Upstairs, another key opened the door of 4C. I put on the lights and I approved, noddingly, as I stalked about as appreciatively. Vivian Frayne, before the holes, had done very much of all right for herself. She had had a beautifully-appointed two-room apartment, rich and elegant: somebody with money and taste had furnished it, or perhaps someone else had had the money and Vivian had had the taste. Nevertheless, although it was an ocular delight, my inspection of apartment 4C added not a whit to my investigation into the death of its occupant. I put out all the lights, all but the foyer light, and I was just about to switch that, when I heard the sound.

Somebody was poking at the lock.

I flicked off the foyer light and, in darkness, I took up a station behind the door. I panted through an open mouth, feeling the perspiration bristle against my skin. I waited, and waited, and waited. . . .

Finally, the door swung open. And closed.

Somebody was feeling for the light switch.

Somebody brushed against me. I sprang.

We went to the floor together, but it was a quick struggle. I found a spot, lashed out twice, and there was no more resistance. We both lay still, me on top. The body beneath me was soft and warm with very little muscle hardness. I pushed up, went to the light and flicked it, and there, sprawled supine but always attractive, lay Sophia Sierra, not unconscious, her eyes fluttering, surprise still a mark on her face. Her right hand held a sharp-pronged pick-lock. A black velvet short-coat was over the red dress. She blinked until, it appeared, I came into focus, for, immediately, she sat up.

"You!" she said.

"You!" I replied. "I'll be a son of a bitch!"

"You are," she said and rubbed at her jaw.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I said. "And with a professional pick-lock yet?" I helped her up. She shook her head groggily, but then she smiled, and I went soft all over again. "What *are* you doing here?" I said, but I said it much more pleasantly.

"You first," she said. "You tell me first." We went together to the living room. I put on the light. She took off the black coat and spilled out on a couch. She looked tired and frightened, but, somehow, that added to her allure.

"Honey," I said, "you're a nice, sweet, attractive gal, and I'm crazy about you."

"Yeah, I remember," she said.

"But I'm working on a murder thing, and I'm working in co-operation with the cops."

"Cops?" she said as if I had really gone mad.

"You heard me. I'm here because the cops gave me permission to be here. In fact, they gave me the keys to get in here. But you're here by virtue of a pick-lock. You've broken in here and you're trespassing. That's a crime either way. If I call the cops in—which I should do—you're deep in trouble right up to that gorgeous chin of yours. Is that what you want me to do?"

"No," she said.

"Then you're going to have to talk it up, sweetie. First of all, what are you doing here?"

"I might be jammed in Vivian Frayne's murder."

"Did you kill her?"

"No."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'll tell you, if you let me," she said.

"Sorry," I said.

"Phelps wasn't the first guy she pinched right from under my nose. I was burning when that happened—"

"So I've heard."

"I beat it out of the Nirvana at that time. I took off a couple of weeks. I went for a vacation. Matter of fact, I went to Cuba. I wrote her a few letters and told her what I thought of her and her tactics. I told her I had friends, real bad boys. I told her that that pretty face of hers was going to be mashed up by them, maybe even worse was going to happen to her. I was hot then, burning. And she was scared witless."

"How do you know?"

"She told me, when I got back. First, she tried to soft-soap me on the Phelps deal—that it wasn't her fault, that she hadn't made a pitch for him, that he'd just kind of gravitated to her. After I thought about it, after I cooled down—I figured that to be true. I really didn't hold it against her."

"What's this got to do with her being scared witless?"

"She said something else to me, back there at the beginning, when I got back from my vacation. She said that if anything ever happened to her, the cops would know that it came from me, *if* it came from me."

"How would they know?"

"She was saving my letters, she said. If anything happened to her, the cops would get those letters, and they'd know that I was behind whatever happened to her."

"I get it," I said. "How'd you feel about that?"

"Once I cooled off, I didn't care. We kind of became pretty good friends after that, as a matter of fact. I think you can figure the rest."

"You mean," I said, "you came here tonight hoping to find those letters. So that no heat would be going toward you on her murder?"

"Correct."

"Honey, this is from the horse's mouth. Don't waste your time. Those letters are not here."

"How the hell would you know?"

"Honey, the cops've racked this joint up pretty good. If your letters would have been here, they'd have found them. And if they'd have found them, they'd have yanked you in for questioning. You can be sure of that."

"Yes, yes, of course," she said softly.

An idea hit me. "Did Vivian Frayne have a vault, maybe?"

"No."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I've had that checked. By experts. You can depend on that. No vault. Not in any bank in the whole city of New York."

I snapped my fingers. "If she saved your letters," I said, sure of my hunch, "I think I know where they are. Now if you want to stop being a liar, I'll make a try for your letters."

"I'm telling you the truth, you damned—"

"About Mousie Lawrence," I said.

"Mousie Lawrence? I never heard of a—"

"The picture I showed you. Back there at the Nirvana?"

"Oh." She sucked in her breath.

"You were lying about that, weren't you?"

"Yes . . . but only because I don't like to talk about what isn't my business. Kids like me, we learn to keep our noses clean."

"Start getting it dirty, sweetie, because if I opened up to the cops about you, you'd be really jammed."

She strode about the room. I watched her, enjoying every nuance of movement. She went to the couch and sat down. She put her face in her hands. "I want to be fair," she said. "What do you want to know? What do you want to know about the man whose picture you showed me?"

"You know him?"

"I don't know him as Mousie Lawrence."

"You know him by any other name?"

"Manny Larson."

"Fine," I said. "Where do you know him from?"

"The Nirvana. And there was another guy."

"Kiddy Malone? Kenneth Masters?"

"That's it. Masters. Lenny Masters. They were picking out girls, girls who would kind of work a little racket without worrying too much about it."

"What kind of racket?"

"I'm not sure."

"Did they approach you?"

"Yes."

"Did you take their proposition?"

"No."

"What was the proposition?"

"Simple. I would be given a few little packages, oh, a few small little packages, no bigger than a couple of lumps of sugar, no bigger than that. They'd be given to me at home, a man would deliver them. Then, at the dance hall, sooner or later, a man would be dancing with me and he would say, 'I come from Larson.' And I was supposed to

say, 'Who's Larson?' And he was supposed to say, 'A friend of Masters.' Then, while we were dancing, I was supposed to slip him the little packet and he was supposed to slip me a folded hundred dollar bill. Somebody, later on, would come to my home to collect. Either I had all the packets, or I had hundred dollar bills for the packets I didn't have. I'd get five bucks for every transaction. Could happen two-three times a night, they told me."

"Why didn't you take the deal?"

"Because it was penny-ante."

"Didn't you also figure it for trouble?"

"I did, but they explained that it couldn't actually be trouble. If anything happened, I would just tell the truth. On the other hand, I was to keep my nose clean. If I talked about it—*without* trouble—then I would be *causing* trouble, and like that, the least that would happen to me would be a dose of acid in my eyes."

"Pretty," I said. "Real pretty. They set up a dope-drop in a dance hall. It's all quiet and furtive in there anyway. They pick special girls who know enough not to shoot their faces off. They use stooges for delivery and pick-ups. A girl has two-three transactions a night. They pick twenty girls and they're doing a minimum gross business of four thousand bucks a night, which is approximately twenty-five thousand bucks a week. Given a little luck—once the thing shapes up—it runs a year. That's over a million dollars worth of business, just in one year. Could be much more than that. Could run much more than a year. Could use more than twenty girls, could use fifty. Could step up the amount of transactions a night to five or six. Those figures could run up fast to real heavy millions. Fantastic, out of one lousy little dance hall in New York. And the guys who set it up would be in the clear. There'd be layers and layers of in-between nobodies who would take the rap once the thing busted. How about Steve Pedi? Did he talk to you about this?"

"No."

"Did he know what was going on?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you talk to him about it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I was afraid to. They warned me what would happen if I discussed it. I wasn't going out of my way looking for trouble."

"And the racket's been working? Going on right now?"

"Yes, I think so. Since they talked to me, I've kind of been watching. It's hardly noticeable, no one would notice unless they were actually watching hard for it, but I'm pretty sure it's been going on."

"Okay," I said, "thanks. Now get up. Let's get out of here." I started putting out the lights.

She stood up and wriggled into the black velvet short-coat.

"My letters . . . ?" she said.

"But of course. Your letters." I chuckled. "What's a murder case without letters? It's like a spy case without The Plans, or The Papers, or The Formula." I took her hand. "Come on. Let's go try for The Letters."

6.

The cab dropped us at 11 Charles Street. I paid the cabbie, waited until he tilted his clock, then added two dollars to the fee. "Please wait," I said. "You'll have another customer in a few minutes."

I pushed the Phillips' button—five short pushes, a pause, and then one long push.

The clicker clicked back. Upstairs, after his peek-hole routine, Gordon Phelps opened the door for us. He was wearing expensive slacks and a white silk sport shirt. He was very pale. He kept chewing on his red lower lip as though he were trying to pry loose a piece of stuck cigarette paper.

"I bring you a guest," I said.

"Ah, the sulphuric Sophia," he said. "Welcome." But he kept chewing on the red lower lip. "Any news?" he said.

"Plenty," I said. "Sophia, would you please go into the bedroom, and close the door behind you?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"It's just that I've got some very personal stuff to talk to Gordon about."

"The hell with both of you," she said, but she went into the bedroom, though she slammed the door viciously.

"Any news?" Gordon Phelps said. "I've been dying here."

"The cops are very anxious for you," I said.

"As Sophia would say—the hell with them."

"They've got reason to be anxious. Special reason."

"Special? Why—"

"Vivian Frayne was murdered with bullets shot out of a gun that belongs to you. That's definite. On the line."

"My gun?"

"Your gun, Mr. Phelps. You the guy that used it?"

"Stop that."

"Want to explain the gun?"

"That's easy, man. I gave Vivian Frayne a gun that belonged to me, even gave her cartridges for it." He shifted. He was now biting on the upper lip. "Gave it to her, as a matter of fact, because of that girl in there, because of Sophia Sierra. Vivian was very frightened of her for a time, wanted some sort of protection. I gave her my gun at that time."

"That your story?" I said.

"It's no story. That's exactly what happened."

"Okay, get your jacket on, and start getting out of here."

"What's the matter with you? What are you talking about?"

"I think it's time for you to change your hide-away," I said. "I've got a feeling that cops are getting close to this place."

"No," he said, but now he was chewing on both lips.

"Yes," I said. "Here's my idea. Slip into a jacket and go over to my place." I gave him my address and apartment number, and my keys. "Nobody'll be looking for you there. Except me. I'll stay here for a short while. When I go, I'll lock up."

He closed the collar of his sport shirt, went to a closet, unhooked a suburban coat, and shrugged into it. He was as pale as the belly of a shark. He shoved a hand into his trousers' pocket. "Here are my keys," he said.

"I don't need your keys."

"Then how'll you lock up here?"

"I have Vivian Frayne's keys."

I took them out and jingled them. He looked as though he were going to faint.

"Where'd you get those keys?" he said.

"From the cops. One of those keys fits here, as you know."

"I know," he said. "What the hell goes? Have you been trading information with them?"

"No, sir. Else they'd be here already."

That seemed logical to him. He nodded, seemed to want to ask another question, changed his mind, and went back to eating his lips as he buttoned the coat.

"Either I or Sophia, one of us, or both, will be back at my apartment pretty soon," I said. "We'll use the same system. Five short rings, a pause, then one long one. You get that, open up. Otherwise, don't open up, just stay put."

He started for the door.

"There's a taxi waiting downstairs," I said.

He turned. "You think of everything, don't you?" He said it almost sardonically.

"I've been paid five thousand dollars to *try* to think of everything," I said.

When he was gone I brought Sophia Sierra out of the bedroom. I said, "Take off the coat, kid. Make yourself comfortable."

She took off the coat and made herself comfortable.

"According to you," I said, "she didn't have a bank vault, and according to me she couldn't have had your letters in her apartment. On the other hand, she had a key to this place, and she was free to come here even while Phelps was away—according to him. So, throwing all those accordings together—this would be the spot where she'd hide something out, provided she had something to

hide out. I don't think she even trusted Phelps on that deal. If she had, Phelps would have told me. He'd have produced those letters. The guy's trying his best to get out from under: told me about threats he heard from Pedi, told me about her fear of you, told me that Vivian was convinced that you had a deep hate going for her. Now, if Phelps knew where those letters were, he would have produced them for me: it would prove up that hate you were supposed to have for her."

"Yeah, yeah," she said, breathlessly.

I continued to ramble. "So if they're here, they're somewhere where Phelps wouldn't be likely to fall over them. That excludes all the usual places. What does it include? Well, I've been in the business of looking for things for a long time, and people just don't have any special imagination when it comes to hiding things. They're influenced by movies and television, and they do the usual ordinary thing, and, somehow, *they* think they're doing something unusual."

She was on her feet.

"I'll start with the bedroom," she said.

I went for the rose-colored nude, reclining over the fireplace, maybe because I'm attracted to rose-colored nudes, and sure enough, first crack, there was the Scotch tape on the brown-paper back. I worked fast, ripped open the back, and pried out three letters complete with envelopes. They were all addressed to Vivian Frayne, all in one handwriting, feminine and flowery. But there was another envelope there, a legal-sized envelope, unaddressed, blank but sealed and somewhat bulky. I opened that quickly. It contained a marriage certificate from Montreal, Canada, expressing a marriage between Vivian Jane Frainovitski and Stephan Burton Pedi. It was dated four years ago. The envelope contained one other document: it was a certificate of divorce from a court in Montreal, Canada, dissolving this self-same marriage between Vivian Jane Frainovitski and Stephen Burton Pedi. That was dated three months ago. I replaced the documents in the envelope and stuck that into my pocket. Then I put back the rose-colored nude and, with three envelopes in my hand, I went to the bedroom. Sophia Sierra straightened from bending to look under a radiator.

"These the letters?" I waved them.

She came near. She looked at the letters in my hand.

"Yes," she said. "All three?"

"All three," I said.

"Gimme."

I did not give. I put the letters behind my back.

A pleasantly crafty look crept into her eyes. A feminine look, pleasant to a male; a filmed, narrow, seductive look; a look with a little smile about the eyes. She came very near to me now, and she put her arms around me. Her lips came to mine and opened softly against my opening mouth. She

kissed, soft-lipped and close. I stood as though rooted, savoring her, her arms tightly around me, my own arms behind my back. That's a lousy way to make love.

She released me, moved back, seemed shy.

"Gimme," she said softly.

I swallowed to find voice.

"Not yet," I croaked.

Her hands flung up. "Why? Goddamn you, why?"

I went into the living room, and she followed me.

"Sweetie," I said, "not yet. You've got to string along with me. I'm working on this thing and I can't turn anything over to anyone before I get it straightened out."

"But why? I don't understand."

"I suppose you've got to be a man," I said seriously, "to be able to understand. With a man there's work and there's love. So I'm not turning anything over to anyone, not until this thing is cleared up and wrapped away. That's my work," I said stubbornly.

Somehow it got through.

She went for her coat, lifted it by its collar, and threw it over one shoulder like a knapsack. "What do you want me to do?" she said quietly.

"Go to my place and wait there for me. Phelps is there." I grinned. "You two ought to be able to spend an interesting evening together until I get there. You ring five short rings, wait a second, then one long one. He'll open up for you."

"What about you?"

"I'll leave here with you. I'll put you in a cab."

"You coming with me?"

"No."

"Where you going?"

"Maybe to get killed," I said.

I got her a cab and I got me another. I sat and sifted it around in my head as I was driven toward 244 West 65th Street. I had it. I had most of it. A lot depended on Kenny Masters, nee Malone, alias Kiddy. I sifted it around, and I liked what I had.

The stoolie-genius was correct again: the entrance door to 244 opened to a push. The hallway was dim and dank, with an old smell of cooked fish. I climbed to the first floor, went to the rear apartment on the right. There was no bell. Paint peeled from the top of a green door. I stood in front of it for a long moment, rubbing my lips against my teeth. Then I knocked.

There was no answer.

I knocked again. And again and again.

I was worried that I might wake a neighbor, but I kept knocking, rapping softly but continuously.

At long last there was a sound, footsteps, a soft barefooted patter.

I stopped knocking. The muted sounds inside ceased.

I knocked again. Once. Hard.

"Yes?" It was a woman's voice, soft-pitched. She was in darkness. No light had come on in the slit beneath the door. "Yes?" she said. "What is it? Who is it?"

I put my mouth close to the crack of the door.

"Open up," I said.

"Who is it? What do you want?"

We were speaking in whispers.

"I want Kiddy Malone," I said urgently. "Open up."

"There's no Kiddy Malone here," she said.

"You want cops, lady?" I whispered.

There was no answer.

"I'm a friend of Kiddy's," I whispered.

"Who are you?"

"Tell him Pete Chambers. Tell him, quick."

Silence. Then the shuffle of the bare feet.

I leaned my forehead against the door. When I moved it back I saw the dark stain of my perspiration. I took out my handkerchief and wiped my face. I put it back.

I touched myself, almost involuntarily, touching for a gun. I had no gun on my person. I wished I did have. Then again, perhaps it was better that I didn't. A cokey is a tricky individual to cope with. You cannot predict his mood. Perhaps an approach with a gun would frighten him. I waited, rigid, leaning against the door. It seemed a long time before I heard her again. This time it was the tap-tap of high heels. I moved from the door and braced myself. She was going to open up, otherwise she wouldn't have put her shoes on. A woman is a woman: a woman does not open a door to a stranger when she is barefooted. She had also probably primped a bit, which is why she had taken so long. A woman is a woman.

I heard a click. A strip of light appeared beneath the door.

"Are you there?" she whispered.

"Right here," I said.

I heard a bolt pull away. The door opened wide and I entered directly into a living room. I did not see the woman. She had remained behind the door as I had entered. Now the door closed and I heard the bolt shoot back into place. I still did not see the woman. She was behind me and I did not turn. I saw Kiddy Malone and that is why I did not turn.

He was seated in an armchair, squarely in the middle of the room, facing me. His hair was tousled but his face was clean and shaven. He was wearing expensive, tight-fitting, black silk pajamas of the ski-type. He was smiling, but his smile was stiff. His eyes were good, better than I had expected. He had stuff in him, but he had it right—he was not overloaded, nor was he in need of a jolt. His blue Irish eyes were clear, the pupils not too widely distended. That pleased me. And his hands were steady, which pleased me even more, because one hand was holding a huge automatic.

"Hi, Kiddy," I said.

"What do you want?" he said.

"That the way to greet a friend?" I said in as gay a voice as I could muster.

He seemed ashamed. The smile became more real, less rigid.

"It's a pretty lousy time to come calling, ain't it?"

"It's because it's important, Kiddy boy. I come as a friend and"—I gestured toward his gun—"look how you greet me."

"You heeled?" he said.

"Would I come heeled—to a friend?"

"Touch him, Betty."

I finally saw her. Once again the stoolie-genius was correct. She was a red-head with a sensational shape, built for a stripper rather than a waitress. She was tall—probably a head taller than Kiddy—with a full large powerful figure, and friend Kiddy had done all right by her in the matter of night clothes. She was wearing high-heeled white silk lounging shoes and a white silk tight-mesh negligee, practically transparent. Long full thighs glistened in the silk as she moved toward me. Unfortunately, there was a disconcerting note, disconcertingly similar to Kiddy Malone's disconcerting note. She too was holding a gun.

Naturally, he was not as smart as he was cooked up to be. If I were on a rash errand, her coming to frisk me would have been a godsend. I could have clipped her gun, used her as a shield, and taken my chances. But I was not being rash this trip. I stood meek as a frightened patient behind a fluoroscope. She touched me.

"No gun," she said.

His smile contracted to pursed lips.

"Sorry, fella," he said.

"I come as a friend," I said. I wanted to hammer that through.

His gun was no longer pointed at me. It rested, within the grip of his hand, in his lap. He looked like a mischievous boy caught holding the matches with which he was going to set fire to the kitchen.

"Give my friend a drink, Betty," he said. "He drinks Scotch, the best in the house."

"You're in good shape," I said.

"The best," he said. "Sit down, friend. Make yourself to home."

I sat down on one end of a divan. The red-head had disappeared into another room, but she came back quickly, without the gun, but with a tray on which was a bottle of Scotch, an open bottle of soda, a pitcher of water, and glasses.

"If you want ice . . . ?" she began.

"Oh, no, thank you. This is fine."

She sat the tray down near me, and she sat herself down on the other end of the divan.

"How do you like my Betty?" Kiddy said.

"A beautiful lady," I said.

"Thank you," she said and she smiled with strong white teeth. She had a wide high-boned face and enormous blue eyes.

"She's the greatest," Kiddy said. "Big as she is, she's—" He stopped speaking suddenly and frowned. "What brings you, Petie? In the middle of the night?" And now his smile was a frightened smile. "And how the hell did you know to get here?" His eyes darted to Betty's and back to mine.

I poured a lot of Scotch and gulped it raw. I needed it.

"I found you," I said, "because you're in trouble. When you're in trouble, that's when a friend is supposed to find you."

"He is a friend," he said to Betty, nodding seriously.

I looked about the room. It was plainly furnished. The floor was bare.

"Not quite like the Montrose," I said, "eh, Mr. Masters?"

His gun popped up, levelling on me.

"Please don't point that thing at me, Kiddy," I said. "I'm on your side. I'm with you."

"What the hell goes?"

"Did you kill him?"

"Me? You out of your brains? Me?" Then his eyes narrowed craftily. "Kill who?" he said.

"Mousie Lawrence had most of his face shot away. Both your holsters were there in the bedroom. Yet you've got a piece right here in your hand. That what you shot him with, Kiddy?"

"Not me. You're out of your brains. Why should I cool Mousie? Mousie's my partner."

"Was," I corrected.

"Mousie was my partner."

"Then what about the gun you're holding?"

"I kept two pieces here. The one the lady's got, and this one. Kept them here. Kept a load of junk here too. Kiddy's no dope, man."

"Kiddy, you in shape?" I said.

"The best," he said.

"Did you blast Mousie? Because if you did, I'm the boy to cover you up, and you know it. Did you, Kiddy boy?"

"No! No, no, no!"

Kiddy Malone did not kill Mousie Lawrence. I had my story. Now it was all up to him.

"Okay," I said. "I know the deal. And I can pull you through. If you work with me."

The gun lowered into his lap. His hands were clenched over it. "You know nothing, pal," he said. "You don't know no deal. You're just a talker. You're trying to make a buck, that's what you're doing. Trying to talk your way into a buck."

"I don't want to earn any bucks, Kiddy."

"What the hell do you want?"

"I want to pull you out of a deal, Kiddy. You're a dead man, Kiddy. You know that. Down deep, you know that. We're old friends, Kiddy. You're just sitting here waiting to get killed, maybe trying to shoot your way through, but getting killed in the end anyway."

He stared at me for a long time. Then, without

any change in expression, he began to cry. The tears came out of the inner corners of his eyes and ran down his nose. He made no effort to wipe them. He sniffed, once.

"Okay, Betty," he said. "Get out of here."

She stood up and smiled at me.

"I hope you're really a friend," she said. "He's a good guy."

"Yes," I said, "he's a good guy."

"Excuse me," she said. "I'll go to sleep now."

"Yeah, go to sleep, baby," Kiddy said. "The stuff you got in you, you'll sleep real good, real good. Good night, baby."

She went away, and I watched her going away, and I enjoyed watching her go away. She closed the door of the other room behind her.

"Give," Kiddy said. "Let's hear."

"We start at the start," I said, then I threw in a threat. "What I know—the cops know. I may fling a guess here and there—but the cops, they've got it all nice and clean."

"Talk, baby. Kiddy's listening."

I drew a deep breath. "You and Mousie," I said, "came into town to set up the Nirvana. Sweet deal too. Package stuff, passed through some of the smart chicks, at a hundred bucks a throw."

His eyes widened, but he nodded. He was mystified but he was approving of me.

"Steve Pedi was in on the pitch . . ." I threw it and let it lie. He smiled, nodding.

I had it all. It was complete.

"Steve Pedi," I said, "was in on the pitch, although he would deny it if it ever shaped up trouble. He just didn't know a thing that was happening to his girls, if it shaped up trouble. Like that, the most that could happen to him would be a revocation of his dance hall license. But it didn't figure to shape up trouble. That was his end—the local end. With a little political pressure, a little gelt passed in the right places—this thing could run and run. You guys were here to set it up, to get it running, and it was just beginning to go—when a crazy dame butts her nose in. Vivian Frayne. Somehow, she got wind of what was cooking—maybe one of the chicks there let it bleed a little—and this Frayne is nuts in the mother-hen department. She gets to Steve and threatens to blow the whistle unless the operation is cut off quick."

"Crazy dame, huh? Boy, how some dames is crazy."

"Stevie-boy fast-talks her, but she's a dead pigeon from the moment she opened up. Here's a crazy dame that's do-gooding on an operation that can gross millions of bucks. All right. So Stevie calls you guys in. You've got to pop her, and pop her quick. No sense calling in anybody else, because anybody else only widens out a murder clique. Keep it close, figures Stevie-boy, because Stevie-boy is a pretty smart fella. So you guys are going to

pop her, and pop her quick, although you're kind of out of practice, you're big shots now. How'm I doing?"

"Keep punching, pal." In his own way, Kiddy was being proud of me.

"He rigged it," I said, "to make it look like a mugging killing, but it got scrambled and he was boiling. He had to move very fast after that, because if she began to think about it, she might get the angle, and then it would be the whistle. So he made the move himself. Now I'll be telling you things you don't know."

"Tell me, boy," Kiddy said. "You're a brain-guy, I always said so."

"Steve Pedi used to be married to Vivian Frayne. He still had the key to the apartment. He also knew there was a gun in that apartment that belonged to a guy called Phelps who had a grudge against her because she was trying to pull some black dough out of him. That set it up pretty good, if he could lay his hands on the gun. So he goes to her apartment, rings the bell and she's not home. He uses his key and goes in. He finds the gun and he hides out, probably on the terrace, until she comes home. She gets into her lounging clothes, he comes out, and pops her with Phelps' gun, which he leaves there. He reminds himself that she must have the marriage certificate, also the divorce decree—because they were married and divorced. He figures if he can hunt that up and get rid of it, he won't be tied in at all, there'd be no idea that he might have a key. So he gives the place a search and he doesn't find either document. Okay. That's not fatal. So if the stuff is found, he gets tied in a little, but it doesn't mean a thing—unless it gets tied tighter, and there are only two guys in the world who can tie it tighter. Get it, pal?"

"I get it, pal."

"You and Mousie."

"I get it, pal."

"Am I giving you any new stuff?" I said.

"A little," he said.

"But you guys didn't know, when he came visiting you at the Montrose, that he had just paid his visit to Vivian's. He had locked the door from the outside, just to make it look all kosher—he'd probably figured Phelps had a key to her place, which he didn't—and he came for a friendly call at the Montrose. But he had first provided himself with another heater. If he gets rid of you two, he's clean, completely clean on the murder that you guys messed up—and the operation keeps going, because you guys can be replaced. He's a smart cookie. He pulled a murder himself. A smart cookie gets rid of anything that can tie him to murder. You guys can tie him, so he's set to get rid of you. As far as the organization is concerned, he's got a clean beef—you guys tripped on a murder. And what's more he's a hero, because it turns out the cops figured

a print on the knife that was dropped as Mousie's. You following?"

"I'm getting ahead of you," Kiddy said, but he was not approving of me any more, he was growing sad.

"So he comes to the Montrose," I said, "for a little chatter. He's going to ball you guys out for the miss, and plan a new little deal for Vivian who's already dead, only you guys don't know it. He's got the new heater on him. He comes, and you all sit around and chat. He's a friend, practically the boss in this operation, so your guns are in the bedroom, and you're all gentlemen. Next, he starts shooting, clips Mousie. Your turn now, Kiddy. Pick it up from there."

"I rammed him," he blurted. "Gave him the rush, the head to the belly, and knocked him on his behind. I didn't have a gun on me, so I ran. Here I am, pal." He lifted a hand to his hair and pulled at it, ruminatively. "You found me. So he'll find me."

"So will the cops."

"The hell with them."

"They're your salvation, Kiddy. Wake up, man."

"What the hell you talking about?"

"You're in the middle, Kiddy, and you've got no out. Pedi's gunning for you, but you might get out of that. But the organization is also gunning for you, because you stink now, you're through. You messed a murder, you messed a big operation, and you're an actual eyewitness to murder, Mousie's murder. Witnesses to murder don't live long when they're on the wrong side of the organization. You're dead right now, kid, and you know it, and even if you get out of here, you've got no place to run, and you know that too. You've got nothing, nobody, except one friend—me. I can keep you alive, Kiddy."

I had my fingers crossed. He was crying again, but I did not care about that. He either accepted me or he rejected me. Now. He was a hophead. Which way would he turn?

"I can keep you alive," I said and I waited.

"How?" he said.

I had him.

"Listen, kid," I said. "Listen hard. You've got no choice. You're a dead man. The whole organization is after you, and Pedi is pushing them, because with you alive—he could be dead, convicted as a murderer. Okay, he killed Mousie. He killed your pal. And you're next. So you've got nothing to lose. You turn around on him. I take you in. I take you in, personally, and you turn around on him."

"Sure, but what happens to me?"

"Nothing, really. Maybe they won't be able to prove the Frayne murder on him, but they'll prove Mousie's murder, with you as State's witness."

"Sure, but what happens to me?" he insisted.

"Nothing, pal. The best happens to you. You're

an alien, an illegal alien. What happens to you—you get deported. The cops figure to work with you. You're State's witness. You spill your guts, the whole deal. They fix you up with a bodyguard. They even change your name for you, and they deport you back to Ireland where you get lost in the shuffle if you don't play the bright spots too hard. Even Mexico can't reach out for you when you're lost somewhere in your own country. After awhile, they forget about you. Pedi'll have the chair, so he can't press them. You've got dough. After awhile you get it together, and you begin to move around. My advice, stick to Europe, stay away from here. Are you listening to me, Kiddy? I'm making a live one out of a dead one. Are you listening?"

"Yeah, I'm listening."

"Do I make sense?"

"God damn right you do."

"I'm glad you were in shape to listen."

"Me too. I'm glad I was in shape. Lopsided, you might have been a sorry boy for coming here."

"I took my chances, Kiddy."

"Yeah, you took your chances. Why?"

"I wanted to make a live one out of a dead one. I know you a long time, Kiddy."

"Yeah, a long time, boy."

"Go get dressed, Kiddy. Right now."

"Yeah, I'll go get dressed. Right now. Here, hold this."

And he gave me his gun.

I brought in Kiddy, and then I brought in Sophia and Phelps, and Parker's people brought in Steve Pedi. I requested that the cops did not make Phelps' involvement public, and they agreed (which earned my fee). Then I did it big and loud and glorious, with gestures, but all of that was to impress Sophia Sierra. She admired me and I adored being admired by Sophia Sierra. I omitted any reference to her letters which brought more admiration, and at the end of a long night, I was sitting pretty. Parker saw it my way about trading with Kiddy—his testimony in return for deportation, and good riddance—and at long last I was back in my apartment, alone with Sophia Sierra, and we were getting looped on Rob Roys (not too sweet) and we were nice and tight when I returned her letters. For this she repaid me with her love, vernacularly speaking. And I, of course, gave her a receipt—more of the same. Though tiring, a nice arrangement.

That there was a moral to all that had happened, I was sure. But I didn't dig for it. Who needed it?



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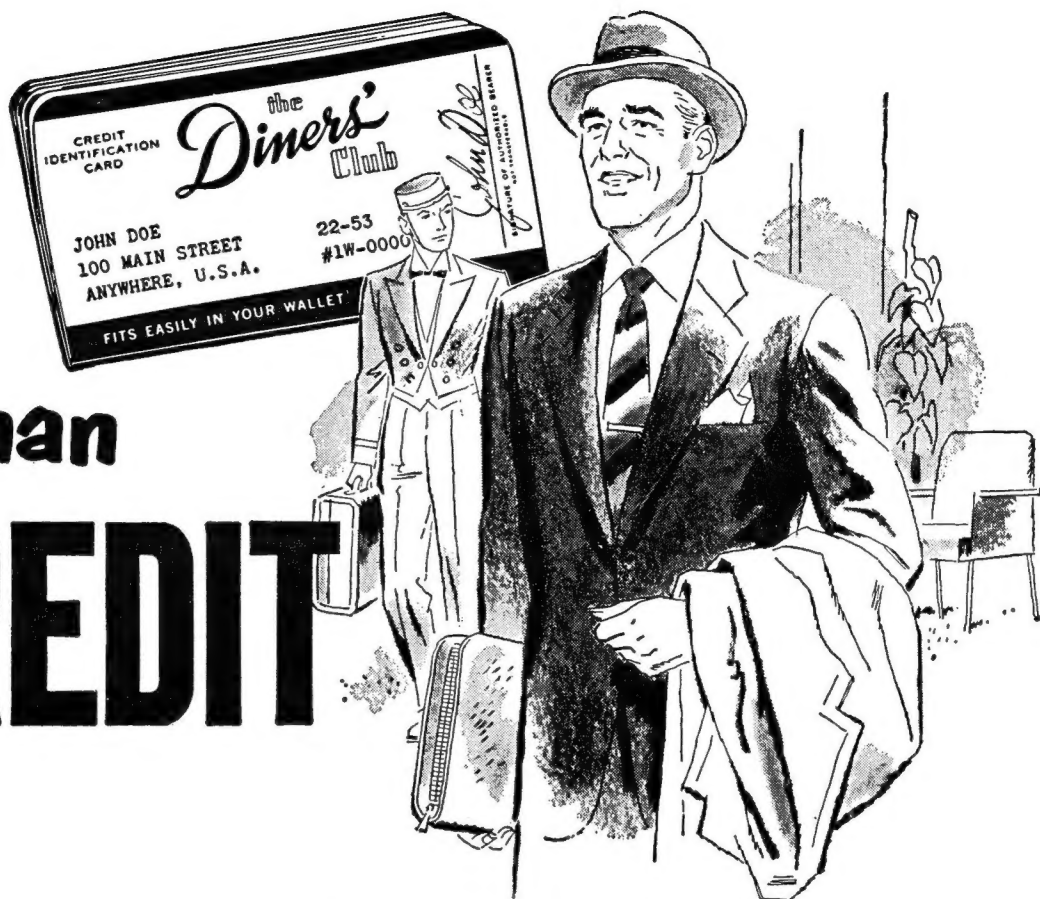
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